they just like to fight by byzinha

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Summary: The summer of 1986 brought a lot of things back - a new notion of family, a life long crush, many pairs of patins. Oh, and a bunch of people everyone thought was dead. / Also filed under "this zombie apocalipse is NO FUN!" and "the darker and not so fluffy sequel of two very cute fics" / 3 of 3, follow up of "we tell each other everything"

1. Prologue

Author's note that is longer than the prologue: Hello there! This is the final statement in my "*as strange as a normal person*" series, that began with **1985**. If you haven't read it yet, don't worry. This is basically a stand alone, though it won't hurt to read the previous two fics, especially because they aren't nearly as long as this one will be.

In case you don't want to go read them, here's what you have to know: **in 1985**, El finally comes back to Hawkins in what would be "season 3" if you must. She's adopted by Hopper, starts to officially date Mike, finds out that she really, *really* enjoys sports, finds herself a couple of girl friends, starts high school with the boys, is revealed a great field hockey talent, breaks her leg, meets her birth mother and enjoys some rap and hip hop. Joyce and Hopper are together.

In we tell each other everything we follow Nancy and Mike from 1983, after the events of season 1, to 1986, more or less where this fic starts. Something happens in 1984 (season 2), but I don't go on specifics, I just say that it was a worse year than the year before. Nancy is in a polyamory situation with Steve and Jonathan (until each one goes their separate ways for college) and Mike even "dates" a girl before El comes back. They have a close relationship with their baby sister Holly. There's a new Jopper baby and her name is Callie. Also, stuff happens in the first semester of '86 that results on El and Mike breaking up. There are a few more spoilers about this fic, *they just like to fight*, during the '86 chapters of *we tell each other*, but they will all appear here anyway, so I won't go on details.

This fic is VERY different from your usual Byzinha-writing-Stranger-Things-fics that have been circulating around. I know I've said before that I wanted to write fluffy and romance, because our kids have enough suffering in the show, but you've got to understand that I'm someone drawn to angst and mystery, even when I don't want to :(For a start, the chapters will be much longer than the previous fics' (hell, chapter 1 is about 8k words long, be prepared). It also will have more POVs and much more supernatural elements than what I wrote before. The lights will blink again. And monsters are coming. 1986 won't be a good year to go to Hawkins.

I hope you enjoy it and leave me your review at each chapter, even if it's just to complain about the lack of Mileven. And thank you for reading.

Stranger Things and its characters do not belong to me. Beta'd by Jenna (littlecajunlady88).

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they just like to fight

PROLOGUE

They came back one by one, out of the blue, with their own agenda to follow.

No one questioned it.

Hell, most people were just glad to see them again.

That was the problem. Homesickness made Hawkins vulnerable right when it was starting to be strong again. A whole city on the verge of a supernatural disaster once again, and its citizens had no clue.

Good thing for them, a group of teen residents just liked to fight.

2. did you hear them calling?

SUMMER

"*Ten tonnes may fall down from the falling sky on to the other side. (…) And all we want is to feel like all we got didn't cost us everything, even if we never win."*

Metric – *Other Side*

1. did you hear them calling?

June, 1986

Elle Hopper

"This camp we are going to tomorrow," El said on the phone, the small sound of baby talk still a little weird in the background. "You think we will pass through Indianapolis?"

"*We will,*" Jennifer answered. El could hear the music her friend was listening to through the phone, and it was LL Cool J. Jennifer was obsessed with him. "*Why?*"

El hummed.

"I was just thinking that we could pass by my mother's house, so I can say goodbye to her," she answered, and for a moment, Jenny was silent. "You know?"

"*Oh, your* biological *mom, right!*" she laughed. "*For a moment I forgot that Ms. Murphy is not your real mom, I was like 'but didn't she have the baby at Hawkins General?' hah.*"

People seemed to forget that a lot. El guessed Lucas was right, white people *did* all look the same, no one ever questioned the little mixed thing that her family was – two moms, three siblings that weren't really hers, a dad that was only one's daddy.

El waited.

"*Yeah, sure,*" Jenny finally said. "*Give us the address and we'll pass by on our way.*"

"Thanks, Jenny," El breathed relieved.

"*No biggie, that's what friends are for,*" she replied and El made a mental note: friends make room in their schedule to make the other friend happy. "*Are you excited?*"

"I am!" El exclaimed. "Feel kinda bad for leaving right now, though."

"Don't be ridiculous, baby," Joyce interrupted, entering in the kitchen at the right moment. "You've been planning to go for almost a year!"

"*Listen to your mom, Ellie,*" Jenny said and chuckled. El smiled. "*I'll see you tomorrow at 9, okay?*"

"Okay," she answered, but Jennifer already had hung up. El turned to Joyce. "Are you sure I can go?"

"Ellie, you already paid for the camp, remember?" Joyce reasoned getting closer and putting El's hair behind her ears. They were the same height now. "You worked so hard for it and you're talented, you *deserve* to go."

She did work really hard to pay for her things, especially after they found out about Callie and all their routines changed in order to make room for the baby.

"Did you pack all your skate things and the… Uh…"

"Hockey sticks?" El suggested, and Joyce nodded smiling. "Yeah, I got everything, but I don't know… I only started skating a few months ago and Jenny said that you're supposed to know at least two types of hockey to do well in camp."

"Elle Hopper, don't you dare chicken out right now!" Joyce accused putting an arm around El's shoulders and guiding her to her room, where three big bags laid open, filled with things she'd need for the next eight weeks. "I'm pretty sure you will nail it like everything you do."

El shrugged.

"I didn't nail English," she pointed out. "Barely passed it."

"C minus is still worth it, and you're still in your lane with field hockey, that's all you really need."

They both got to work on finishing El's bags. She had all the roller skates' tools, and her rollerblades and the hockey sticks, and her security things like leggings and elbow pads, and she was really, *really* nervous.

"Callie won't even remember me when I come back," El said looking down, and Joyce sighed.

"And she still will be too young for it to make a difference," she said, taking El's hand and sitting down the bed. El followed her. "Look, it's fine to be nervous, baby. You think I'm not nervous about letting you go to Illinois with the Hayes girl all by yourself for two months? Hell, I'm terrified! But I also know that *you will be fine*. Ellie, you're a fighter and a survivor, you know that. You will be just fine."

"But what about you?"

"What *about* me? I'm dandy!" Joyce exclaimed, making El laugh. "The boys are home, and your dad. And we finally rented the lake trailer. We're soaring, baby, and time will pass like this," she snapped her fingers. "You'll see."

El sighed, feeling relieved. Joyce was probably right, and they didn't need her there all the time it was proven. She could do her own thing for a while with no side effects.

"Now, did we miss anything?"

"Just my pillow," El said, and reached for the white and pink fluffy pillow that had been hers since she came back. "But I will need it to sleep tonight."

"Then we are all set," Joyce said smiling.

El smiled too, glad to have Joyce and Hop and the boys. She opened

her mouth to say something, but then Callie started to cry. Joyce sighed.

"Impressive how much noise such a tiny pair of lungs can generate, huh?" she joked, and El raised her eyebrows. "Better get used to it again."

"Mom?" called Jonathan from the other room with a little panic in his voice. He was the one taking care of Callie right now. "Help?"

Joyce tapped El's knee twice and then got up to go rescue Jonathan from a diaper change, or maybe to feed Callie. Less than 24 hours with the baby at home and no one had adapted yet.

El saw Bark and Molly follow Joyce and Jonathan and she got up to see what they were doing. Both dogs sat in front of the open door with guarded posture. Well, no one but the dogs, it seemed. They were already nailing the baby business.

"Weirdos," Will said, leaning against the doorframe of what now was his and Jonathan's bedroom.

After they found out about the baby, the Hoppers and the Byers had to trace a plan together to make their messy family work. The Byers' home wasn't a mansion, but it still was bigger than Hop's trailer, so they fixed the trailer for rent and baby proofed the house. Since Will's former room was bigger, El was moved there to share with Callie's crib and he had to move to Jonathan's room.

They also had to reform the shed outside to be the dogs' own home, because Bark wasn't allowed to sleep in the same room as the baby and they had been meaning to give Molly a new bed for quite a while now.

Everyone was working hard to make the transition as smooth as possible. Joyce made a deal with one of the stores she worked in, and now she'd work in only one place part time. Will got a job at the record store, and was responsible for buying his own things now; same happened to El who, ever since Holly's birthday in March, had been contracted to make some "magic tricks" in several children's parties. It was incredible how much those people were willing to pay

for a couple of hours of entertainment.

At first, Mike had been against it. He was nervous about her using her powers so much, worried about someone catching her on something, but El didn't mind. She was doing simple tricks, like floating stuff and guessing cards. Besides, she liked to practice. She swore to never again be caught by surprise by anything supernatural like it happened three years ago.

So El was doing children's parties. That was how she paid alone for the camp, bought all her hockey material and still managed to help in the houses.

That was something else, too. All of the extra money the siblings got, they gave to Joyce and Hop. Even Jonathan sent something from New York every now and then.

Will crossed the corridor to stand next to El. He was shirtless, and he had a scar on his chest from what happened in 1984, when she still wasn't around. Out of all the boys, Will still was the smallest, but even so he was almost a head taller than her.

"So," El said crossing her arms. "Are you going to claim your room back while I'm gone?"

Will grinned.

"Maybe," he said peaking inside. They had added light pink wallpaper to the walls, the whole room almost foreign from how it was only four months before. "Your mattress looks incredibly comfortable."

El giggled.

"You can keep the room while I'm gone, I don't mind," she told him. "But remember you'll be sharing with Callie."

Will sighed.

"I think I can handle," he said. "You, on the other hand… after spending *two months* sleeping in the middle of nowhere, I don't know."

"Will," El reasoned. "We already live in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh," Will breathed, as if he had just realized that. "True."

Bark abandoned his serious posture and laid down, head on paws facing Joyce and Hop's room where they could hear her and Jon talking. Molly stayed put.

"Do you want me to drop Mike's things at his place while you're gone?" Will asked, and El frowned.

"What?" she asked a second before understanding what he meant. She looked back in the room and to the corner by the window where there was a box filled with things she had borrowed from Mike and never had given back. "Oh…"

El sighed. The past couple of months had been brutal for her and Mike in some ways. He didn't support her in her work decisions, she didn't know why he was so constantly upset, and Jennifer had been bugging her with all kinds of weird questions like how did she know she really liked Mike and how could she be so sure if he was the only guy she'd ever dated.

El didn't know how those things mattered, but Mike did. So they talked and talked for way too long, and they fought a few times, because for a long time they couldn't agree on anything, until finally they decided to break up.

It was weird.

"No," she finally said. "No, I'll do that when I come back."

"You sure?" Will asked, just to make sure. El nodded.

"It's fine," she said, even though that wasn't the right word. She didn't *know* what the right word would be anyway, no wonder she almost failed English. Will patted her shoulder sympathetically.

"It's okay if it's not, you know that, right?" he said, and she half shrugged, half nodded. "You better go rest, though. You have a long trip ahead tomorrow."

Yeah, she did, but she wanted to wait for Hop to come home before going to bed, which only took half an hour, not nearly enough time to check all her hockey material for the tenth time or something.

Jonathan would drive El to Jennifer's house, but the whole family woke up early the next morning to say goodbye and give her one last hug. Suddenly, eight weeks felt like a lot of time and Hopper held El for almost a whole minute.

"Dad," she said, her voice muffled by his shirt. He finally let her go.

"I know, sorry," he said all nervous. "It's just… you remember what I told you, okay? If anyone tries to bully you or hurt you or-"

"Dad," El interrupted, fixing the strap of her backpack on her shoulder. "Superpowers, remember?" Hop opened his mouth to protest, and she smiled. "I know, just kidding. Self defense first. Don't worry, I've got this."

Hop sighed and hugged El again, kissed the top of her head.

"Hopper," Joyce said.

"Okay, *okay*," he patted El's head and she chuckled.

"Come on, Ellie," Jonathan called, but she still had to say goodbye to the dogs.

El kissed Molly's head, and then she had to kneel in front of Bark, who looked at her with serious chocolate eyes, knowing that she'd abandon him for two months, but managing to not judge, not in front of her.

"You be a good boy, okay?" she said to him. "You take care of Molly and mom, and also you protect baby Callie, all right? Understand?"

He licked her nose, making her giggle and El hugged him, his yellow fur super fluffy against her cheek. He was such a good dog and she loved him a lot. El kissed him a few times and then she was ready to go.

Jonathan drove, making small talk and in less than ten minutes they

were parking in front of the Hayes' home. He helped her with the bags and his goodbye was almost as long as Hopper's.

Jennifer's dad was putting the bags in their minivan and he told El to go inside have some breakfast with Jen. She already had eaten, so instead she went to her friend's room. Jennifer's room was white and purple with one of the walls almost completely filled with posters of hockey players and rock bands.

"Did you sleep well?" Jenny asked, mouth full of donuts. El shrugged. "Before my first camp I could barely lay still, so anxious I was. I was on my first Pee Wee year and looked so small."

Ever since El decided that she really would go to that summer camp with Jen, she started to learn more about hockey and all the leagues it had. Mostly, she learned from Jennifer, but she'd been doing her own research also, and had looked into enough stuff to know that she started at least eight years too late in this sport thing.

"I guess," El answered walking around the room, eyes scanning everything. She spotted a book on the nightstand and went to check it. "But all is a bit hectic at home anyway with the baby, so..."

"True," Jennifer said, but El wasn't sure she really understood, she was an only child.

El opened the book to see who it belonged to, though she already had a good guess – she had helped pick that paperback a few weeks ago.

"And what time did Dustin leave?" she asked. Jennifer choked on her coffee.

"What?"

"Last night, when did he leave?" El looked at her wide eyed friend and raised the book. *Ender's Game*, the book everyone decided to read after Mike spoke so highly of it. Jennifer shook her head.

"Oh, no, he loaned it to me," she said. Funny, El could *swear* Dustin hadn't past by Ender's first year of training. "I'm reading it, it's pretty good."

"I know," she replied and left the book on the stand again. "I will let this one pass this time, Jen, but you don't fool me."

Jennifer took another bite of her donut and chewed slowly, probably to avoid confrontation.

"Girls, we're leaving in five," Mrs. Hayes said, sticking her head in Jenny's room. "Ellie, are you sure you don't want to eat anything? We have a good four hour drive ahead of us."

The girl thought about it. She did bring snacks in her backpack, and Jonathan had prepared pancakes that morning, but…

"You don't happen to have any Eggos, do you?" El asked, and Mrs. Hayes smiled.

"As a matter of fact, we do!" she exclaimed, making the girl smile too. "Come here, sweetie."

Hawkins to Indianapolis was only forty minutes afar, so after fifteen in the car, El spoke again.

"Uh, Mr. Hayes, do you think it would be much trouble to stop at my mother's house really quick, just so I can say goodbye?"

"Not at all, kiddo," he answered, looking at her through the rear view mirror and smiling. "Jenny told us about it."

Mrs. Hayes turned in her seat.

"I think it's so nice that you stay in touch with your mother, Ellie," the woman said sympathetically. "Jennifer couldn't explain exactly what happened, but I figure it must be hard."

El looked from Jenny to her mother wondering if she should say something, and that reminded of Mike's words, '*don't leave people waiting, if it feels like you should be talking, then talk*', which was kind of bad because she'd been doing such a great job keeping Mike out of her head for the past couple of hours.

"It's complicated, I guess," she said at last. El tried to access all the made up story she had to tell every now and then. "I was taken from

my mom because they thought she was sick, but she wasn't. No one told her where they sent me, she was looking for me for *years*. And then I ran away, met the boys, met Hopper. I was adopted and Hop had my biological mom's contact, so we were reunited. I guess that's it."

"You chose your adoptive family, though," Mrs. Hayes observed. "Is there something wrong with your mom?"

"I chose Hop for many reasons," El told her, but didn't go into details. She had learned that it was bad to leave people hanging like that, but she didn't want to dig on the reasons behind her choices. She didn't think it was anyone's business.

The Hayes seemed to understand that, and they didn't press the subject anymore. A few minutes later, they stopped in front of the Ives' lonely home. Aunt Becky was in the front yard watering plants and El hopped out of the car to greet her.

"Hi aunt!" she said excitedly, skipping to the woman.

"Little Hopper!" Becky exclaimed. "I thought you'd be halfway to Illinois right now!"

"I am," she pointed back at the car. "But I wanted to see you guys again before leaving. Where's Terry?"

"Backyard," Becky informed, and that's where El headed next.

Her mother was seated on the back porch with a bunch of gardening material around her, but instead of fixing the garden, she had a black and white kitten on her lap that she petted absently. As soon as El saw the kitten, she stopped.

"Mom?" she called. Terry turned her head and looked at her, a beautiful smile on her face. "Who's the little fellow?"

"I don't know," Terry answered, looking down at it. The little thing was purring. "I found it hiding in our gardening tools. Do you want to pet it?"

El shook her head and even stepped back.

"Cats don't like me very much," she said. "And I have my dogs' scent all over…"

Terry reached for El's hand delicately and guided her to pet the cat's tiny head. For a couple of seconds El held her breath, but when the kitten nosed her and leaned against her hand, she gasped amazed.

"They don't *all* hate you, you just got to meet them early enough," Terry said softly and caressed her arm. "It's a good moment to leave, you know?"

El frowned.

"What do you mean?" she asked stopping to pet the cat.

"I don't want you around while they're still adapting back."

They who? It was always odd when Terry got all mysterious like that, but El didn't have time to dig into what she meant right now and her mom seemed to know that. Maybe that was even the reason she had been so vague in the first place.

"Have a nice drive, okay?" she said, and kissed the back of El's hand. "And have fun at camp, forget everything about here."

"I will try," El said, and then she hugged Terry briefly. "I'll be back in a couple of months. Bye, mom."

She hugged Becky before she went back to the car and the rest of the trip was uneventful. They only stopped again once around 1 p.m. for lunch and then it was just little over an hour to arrive at Illinois' hockey camp after they crossed the border.

By the time they parked, there already was a lot of kids and parents around. Jennifer said that it was because the camp opened at 8 a.m.

"Why don't you girls go see which bunk you were sorted? We'll take the bags," Mr. Hayes said.

El and Jennifer got their backpacks and El let Jen lead the way. They got in a line to get their camp kits with their assigned bunks and schedule, as well as the first week's program.

"I got moved from last year's bunk!" Jennifer exclaimed. "What's yours?"

"Bunk seven," El said looking down at her schedule as she walked alongside Jennifer.

"Yes!" Jennifer celebrated. "I asked them to put us in the same bunk, but I wasn't sure they would. Bunk seven is the best, I got it when I was twelve. The only one with a place to put your skates *out on the porch*."

"Does that make any difference?" wondered El and Jen scoffed.

"Three days training morning and afternoon, Ellie, wearing skates for half of the day. I'll give three days and then you tell me if you'd rather those skates stay inside."

Mrs. Hayes came bringing El's equipment and left the heavy bag in the middle of the bunks opening, where many bags were being left.

"Did you get your favorite bunk this time, Jenny?" she asked, and Jennifer nodded excitedly. "Fine, I will tell your dad to take everything there. Seven, right?"

"Yep," the blonde replied. Her mother already had turned around. "Well, well, well, look who's there!" she exclaimed, eyes on a guy that was coming in their direction.

He wasn't very tall, maybe Will's height, and he had straight brown hair streaked with some gold. He was also wearing sunglasses and had a bit of a movie star vibe that was confirmed by his smile once he saw Jennifer.

"How's Illinois' one and only Junior MVP?" she asked when he stopped in front of them and dropped his bag by their feet. Everything about him changed once he started talking.

"Oh, *please*," he said. Something in his tone caught El's attention. It was almost as if he was… shy. "I don't deserve that title."

"Bullshit," Jennifer stated. He opened his mouth to protest, but she wasn't having it. "Verb, you're easily the most promising hockey

player I've *ever* seen, take the compliment."

"Ma'am, yes ma'am," he joked making El chuckle. "Oh, we've got a rookie?"

"Yeah," Jennifer said hooking her arm on El's. "This is my friend Elle, she's crazy good in the field. Ellie, this is Verb."

"*Verb*?" she echoed shaking his offered hand. And people thought 'Eleven' was a weird name. He shrugged.

"Lennox Grey," he corrected taking off his sunglasses. His eyes were impossibly green. He was pretty.

"No one calls him that," Jennifer informed. "We all just call him Verb."

"It's a nickname," he said. She'd figured.

"Because he's responsible for making things happen in the rink," Jen explained. Verb made a face.

"That's not true."

"That's a hundred percent true."

He shrugged again.

"Okay, it's a little true," Verb admitted and only then El noticed that he still was holding her hand. They let go awkwardly.

"That's a cool nickname," El said putting her hands in the pockets of her jeans shorts. She turned to Jennifer. "Is there a phone I could use?"

"Already?" Jenny exclaimed.

"I've to tell my dad that I'm alive," El justified even though her call had nothing to do with Hopper and everything to do with Terry Ives.

"My parents can tell them," Jennifer said, and then she turned to Verb. "She's from Hawkins too."

"Figured," he said.

"Your parents will only get back at night," said El. "Look, is there a phone or not?"

Jennifer sighed and pointed beyond the line of bunks towards the table they got their programs. El thanked her and went to what she found out was the administration office.

"How old is she?" Verb asked Jennifer watching El go.

"Fourteen," Jen answered, and then she narrowed her eyes at him. "Verb Grey, *don't you dare!*" she hit his arm and he flinched.

"Ouch, Hayes! I didn't say anything!" he exclaimed, and she put her hands on her hips. "Gee, you're no fun."

"I know, that's why I defend so much better," she replied, chest up, and Verb laughed.

"Yeah, we'll see about that after Sonic arrives," he said. Jennifer blushed.

"I will let you know, this year things will be different," she guaranteed. He didn't believe her. "Besides, Ellie is out of your league."

Verb laughed.

"I'm sorry, did you *see* this," he gestured in general to his face and body, making her roll her eyes.

There wasn't anyone in the office to use the phone, so El went straight to it bringing to memory one of the four phone numbers she memorized and dialing with quick fingers. It rung once, twice, three times before someone picked up.

"*Hello?*" it was Mike. El gasped and closed her eyes grasping the phone tightly.

"Mike?" she said low, almost a whisper, her chest fluttering. Damn, what the hell.

"*El? Is everything okay?*" he asked worried. She liked to hear his voice.

"I'm fine," she answered. "We just got here. Place is pretty."

"*Cool,*" he said, and they were silent for a couple of awkward beats before El spoke again.

"Is Nancy around?" she asked.

"*Uh…*" Mike stuttered. "*Yes, she is. Just a sec. NANCE!*"

El giggled. He always did that, flip so quick to this loud self and be back to calm contained Mike with her, it was so interesting. Lucas did the same, but with his mother.

"*Ellie?*" Nancy picked the phone. El didn't even have the chance to say goodbye to Mike, but she had to bite down that little life disappointment. "*Is there a problem?*"

"Not really," she said. Why did everyone think that something was wrong when she called? Couldn't she just be willing to have some nice conversation? "Well, not here, I'm doing great here. But there might be a problem in Hawkins, I don't know… I need you to check something for me, and it probably will help with your research."

Silence.

And then-

"*What do you mean?*" Nancy asked, a little edge in her voice. "*How do you know about my research?*" she whispered and El rolled her eyes.

"You're really asking me that?" El knew everything. Nancy sighed.

"*Spill it,*" she said.

"My mom said something weird today. My mom Terry, I mean, and I need you to go grill her a bit until she makes more sense."

"*Okay, what did she say?*" Nancy said in full professional mode already.

"She said that it was good for me to stay away while they're 'adapting back', does that make any sense to you?"

"*No…*" Nancy mumbled. El thought so.

"I need to know what she means. Who are 'they'? How come they are 'adapting back'? You think you can check it out for me?"

"*I can*," Nancy said. She didn't even stutter, that was what El was looking for: someone willing to do the action. Suddenly, she really understood Verb's nickname. Someone who makes things happen. Like Nancy. She wanted to see him play. "*Are you and Mike still being weird?*"

The question caught El by surprise, and she hummed, unable to formulate a reasonable answer.

"Look, I better go, I don't even know where my bunk is yet," she said instead. "Uh, Nance, can you call Hop and tell them that I've arrived and I'm fine?"

"*Sure*," Nancy said. "*Can I tell him about Terry?*"

"I guess," El shrugged. "I mean, you want him in your business?"

It was Nancy's time to hum.

"*Maybe I'll talk to her first and see if it's worthy. You call me in a week so I can tell you what I gathered, okay?*"

"Promise," El said. "Thanks, Nancy."

"*All for my favorite sister-in-law,*" she replied. "*Shit, I keep forgetting*," she said, realizing her mistake a second too late.

"It's fine," El sighed. "I'm getting used to it too."

"*Rock the rink, Ellie*," Nancy said instead, trying to change the subject really quick. "*And try not to break any bones this time*."

El laughed.

"Will do my best!" she said, and they said their goodbyes before hanging up.

By the time El went back to the pile of bags, Jennifer and Verb were still talking – or arguing, maybe, she couldn't figure out for sure. Their voices were really heated, but maybe they were just being passionate about something?

"…all I'm saying is to give her some space, okay? It's all very new-ELLE!" Jennifer interrupted her speech midway as she looked at El. "We better go get our things ready, I still want to show you the camp before dinner. You've *got* to see the ice rink, it's *so cool!*"

Their bunk was near the lake and a little chilly, but it was large despite being packed with beds. It was made of wood like all the others, painted green outside, and it had two large closets with several strong shelves to hold heavy bags. Jennifer explained that most people left their equipment bag under their beds, because they would need it more often, and the clothes bag in the closets.

"Those who are shy use the closets to change too, but that's not your case, right?" Jen said, slapping El's ass. That ass slapping was something she'd been getting used to ever since she started training again with the school's team. First it was just weird, but now she didn't mind anymore.

Mr. and Mrs. Hayes left their things on the porch, where El saw the shelves used to put their skates, as Jenny informed getting a wood strap, a brush and a paint pot of pink gouache that was by the window.

"We better claim the best spots already, since we sure as hell will get the worst beds," she said as she wrote *J. Hayes* in uppercase letters. "Bonnie got hers already," she pointed at one of the shelves with *B. Strauss* on the name tag. "We arrived too late today."

She chose the top shelf on the right and fitted her name in the name tag, and El followed her steps. She chose the green gouache, got a wood strip and wrote *E. Hopper* on it. Then, she chose the shelf right under Jenny's. Only after that they went inside.

They managed to get beds next to one another, Jennifer in the low bunk, El in a single one, and they already fixed their beds, getting the sheets and pillows ready. Jennifer put her Ohio jersey on her bed from when she was in the team, just to "make sure everyone knew who that bed belonged to". Since El didn't have a jersey with her name, she left one of her personalized sticks there. They got themselves a bag of Lays and headed out.

Jennifer showed El most of the things they had in the camp: where the cafeteria was, the showers, the lake (though it was the first thing she noticed when they arrived), the hockey field, game room, radio room, the courts and finally, at the very limit of the camp, the ice rink.

"It was built to be a minor arena, but people weren't willing to come all the way here to watch 12 years old play," Jennifer was telling El as they entered in the building. She should have gotten a jacket. "So they built the camp around it, and some teams also use the place as concentration when it's not season. You know, *summer* season, not *game* season."

"I got it," El said with her mouth full of chips.

Of course she couldn't expect something like the Chicago Stadium, but the arena was pretty good, the rink was just like the professionals. Jennifer made a beeline to the benches. They hadn't brought their ice skates this time, but many people did and were using the rink to play, parents included. A lot of people greeted Jen.

"Okay, doesn't look so horrible," El commented. Every single person in there skated better than her, even the 10 year olds, but the environment seemed nice. Jennifer scoffed.

"You tell me after you meet Cresta," she said. "He's *hardcore*."

El frowned. At first, Jennifer had spoken so highly of camp that El was sure she would have a great time there, but now that they arrived, her friend kept pointing out how things weren't as fun as she supposed, and she was starting to think twice.

"He trains ice only," Jenny said. "And maybe he won't even be

responsible for our age, but be prepared."

"For Cresta?" a girl asked behind them and both girls turned around. El's eyes widened. That was the most beautiful girl she had *ever* seen in her life. Jennifer nodded. "He's with the Pee Wee, I checked."

Jen sighed relieved and the girl chuckled.

"How you doing, Hayes? And who's the rookie?"

She tilted her head in El's direction and she tried to close her mouth. The girl had this long curly brown hair that she was putting in a ponytail, beautiful tanned skin and incredible green eyes, she was mesmerizing.

"Chillin'," Jen answered. "This is Elle, and she's raw talent. Elle, meet Bonnie. She's our bunk's counselor."

"Wow," was everything El managed to say making Bonnie laugh. She got up and with her blades on she was a head taller than El.

"You're not so bad yourself, Ellie," she winked, and El smiled. "I will see you guys later at the bonfire, right?"

"You bet," Jennifer said. They watched Bonnie step on the ice and slide away, and El even sighed.

"Wow," she said again. "She's *so beautiful*."

"Yeah, it's almost disturbing," Jen agreed.

"What does she do?"

"She's the goalie, and she's crazy good. With her in defense and Verb in attack, they are called the Mighty Twins."

"They are twins?" El asked and Jennifer shook her head.

"Only in the rink," she said looking at her watch. "It's almost dinner time, let's go find my parents."

Dinner was an Event in the first day, with the staff proudly

promoting all the campers who won some sort of title since the past year (including Jennifer, who played for Ohio in the 15U competition), to the presentation of the bunk counselors – who were all people in their last year of camp. The food was different from what El was used to, but it wasn't bad, and the loud cafeteria reminded her of school, only that everyone was a jock.

After that, the parents finally left. Jen's dad cried a little and she said that he always did that.

"He's a softie," she told El as they walked to their bunk to get some jackets before heading to the bonfire. "And the funniest part is that he doesn't even like sports all that much, me here was all my mom's doing."

"It's nice of him to support you like he does," El said seriously, and Jen nodded.

"He's great," she replied with a smile.

There was *more* food at the bonfire. And booze. Understandable, considering that it was organized by the campers, not the staff, but some staff members were there too.

They took turns talking about each other because it "stimulated trust", and that was how El found out that Bonnie was from Kentucky and had gotten an early entry in a Canadian college, or that Verb was the last cut of the National team last season, or how this girl Roxie was a bit of a field sensation in Pittsburgh.

"Rookie, your turn!" an older guy said, tossing the puck to El. She wasn't the only newbie, but was the only among the teens. Everyone there knew each other for several summers.

"Well…" she started, taking a deep breath. She'd been preparing to talk for a while, but whenever she had to put a lot of words together, she felt a little overwhelmed. "I'm Elle Hopper, I'm from Hawkins, Indiana, and I will turn 15 on August 1."

People cheered, startling her a little.

"Another birthday!" a guy with striking dark hair exclaimed. She

didn't know his name. "We *have* to have a party, man."

"Shut up, Sonic, let the girl talk," Bonnie said throwing a pebble at him.

"Uh… what else?" El tried to remember what the others had mentioned when they talked. "I've been playing field hockey for less than a year. I mean, I played it *intensely* for a week in September, but then I broke my leg. From mending the bone to recovery was about four months… and only after that Jenny told me that you're supposed to know at least two types of hockey to come here, so I've learned how to skate, what?" she looked at Jennifer. "Five months ago?"

"Something like that," Jen confirmed.

"I'm not very good, but I'm working hard. My brother helped me and all. I've only ever played in school. I guess that's it."

"You seriously have been playing for such little time?" the older guy asked incredulous. El nodded.

"Had never even watched a single game until I was adopted a year and a half ago," she told them.

"Wow," he said. "That's impressive. I watched your tape and you are *good*, kiddo."

"Raw talent," Jennifer whispered to El.

"Don't go getting any ideas, Cresta, she is *mine*," a woman said. She was Foussy, the 17U field trainer.

"The rookie has some fans already," Roxie commented. "We better watch our backs."

It turned out that no one had to watch anyone's backs. No matter how much "raw talent" El had, she still was way behind everyone her age. Because of her birth date, she was put with the over 15 and their training was *hard*. A couple of days in Foussy was talking to the head director to adapt El's program in a way that she'd train with both 17U *and* the 14U.

If she already was exhausted, she didn't want to imagine what her life would be with double training.

"They just want you to be the best you can be, Ellie," Bonnie said on their third night after El told her about Foussy's plan. "They see potential in you, don't worry."

"Potential is breaking my bones again," El replied. She practically sank in her bed without even changing to her PJ's. "Leave me alone to die."

Bonnie chuckled.

"We're having a night game in a few, aren't you coming?" she asked, and El shrugged as best as she could without moving much.

"Will be right there."

She didn't. Instead, El fell in a heavy sleep unaware of all the noise outside or the girls that came in a couple of hours later all noise and laughs. She slept through all of that like a baby, and maybe she would wake up the next day not feeling horrible for a change if only-

Dreamless sleep started to change just subtly, with a little temperature drop and whispers, whispers, whispers escalating from breeze to wind in a stretched moment-

Come for me-

Find me-

Find us-

Will.

"Will?" El whispered too, tossing in the bed a little. In her mind, she was looking around the dark room again, and they called not her, but she was going anyway. "Will?"

Find us-

The voices mixed together whispering orders to the wind. They

wanted him, so El had to find him first.

Come to us, William, find us-

El kept walking and looking around. Will had to be somewhere around here, she could feel it, but that place was odd, as if it was repelling her. She was not welcome there.

The temperature dropped even more in bunk seven, and fifteen girls felt the dampness of the Upside-down on their skin. What was the limit of two worlds?

El felt sick at each step, but decided to fight the repelling. Whatever it was, it'd take her straight to Will, she knew.

"Will?" she called again, voice stronger this time. "Please don't go, I'm right here!" though she didn't know what she was telling him to avoid.

Until she saw it.

The incubator was a cylindrical thing much like the deprivation tank El was so familiar with, but it also was a living, breathing thing. There was someone inside it, she could tell through the semi-transparent red veins of that cocoon. She walked around the incubator checking it up and down, trying to figure out what it was doing, and when she raised her eyes again to the dark room, she gasped.

"One," El hushed, counting. "Two. Three…"

El stepped further to the next incubator feeling her stomach twist. Four, five-

"Six," she said under her breath. "Six…"

What did it mean?

El reached for the incubator near her. In her bed, she raised her hand to the roof, two fingers ready to touch it. Ash fell on her slowly.

"Ellie?" someone called her, and she gasped, dropped her hand.

"Will?"

He was there, she could see him. He was as mesmerized by the incubators as she was. But he wasn't the one calling her.

"Ellie, wake up, you need to wake up."

Someone was shaking her, but she had to fight it. She had to talk to Will, it wasn't safe for him there.

"Ellie!"

El's eyes snapped open and she took a deep breath not because she was hyperventilating, but because she needed to make sure she was alive, like she used to do when she went away. She blinked a couple of times and focused on Jennifer, who was sitting by her side, concern all over her face. The ashes were still falling, but way less than before.

"I need to call home," El said with determination, her arm dropped back in the bed.

"You were having a nightmare," Jennifer said. El sat up, pushing the sheets aside. She frowned at the ashes on them and checked her hands.

Oh, crap.

"I need to call home," she repeated a little stronger. Jen held her hand trying to divert El's attention.

"Office is closed at night," she said. "What you need to do is to turn on your other side and go back to sleep. Trust me, it always works."

El looked up at her friend. She couldn't expect Jenny to understand, but her attitude bothered her anyway. She pulled her hand from Jen's and stepped out of bed.

"Ellie," Jenny tried again, but El already was walking out the door. "Where are you going?"

"Let her," said Roxie. "At least now we can sleep without her

moaning. Who the fuck cares about Will?"

"Will is her brother, you bitch," Jennifer snapped. El's brother and one of Jennifer's best friends.

"Girls, come on," Bonnie reasoned. "Jen, go back to bed. Elle probably just needs some air."

It was probably true.

"Yeah, Jenny," Roxie mocked. "Go to bed."

"Shut up, Roxie," Bonnie interfered.

Jennifer sighed and went back to her bed. Outside, El considered opening the office door and calling home. It was chilly at night for her shorts and tank top, the humid air blowing from the lake, and then it hit her.

The lake.

It had the wrong proportions, no salt at all, but it could work. She headed to the deck, bare feet on cold wood. The water was probably freezing, but she had to talk to Will, *she had to stop him*, so she didn't think twice. She jumped.

There was the thermal shock, but in the end the temperature wasn't so different from the lake from her backyard. El emerged and floated on her back, closing her eyes and searching. It was easy to empty her mind there.

It took her almost a minute to find Will. He was on the front lawn of their home as if hypnotized, and she stepped closer to him.

"Did you hear them calling?" he said low not looking at her. El nodded.

"They don't like me," she told him. "I shot their messenger."

Almost literally. Will knew.

She held his wrist.

"Will, look at me," El requested, and when he didn't, she held a little tighter. "Look at me."

He looked.

"You can't follow them," she said resting her hand over the scar on his chest. "You are strong, you can resist them."

"I don't know…" he sighed, eyes low.

"*I* know," El replied. "Will. Be strong."

"Ellie," he said with haunted eyes. Right then they heard the sound of a baby crying coming from the house and they both looked back.

"You focus on work, okay?" El said in a hurry. "And you help mom with the baby, and do your thing, anything that would keep you away from them, you hear me?" Will nodded. "Promise me."

Will held her hand, the one that was on his chest, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I promise," he said looking her in the eyes. El sighed relieved.

"Now go," she whispered.

She blinked and her consciousness was back in the lake. El swam back to the deck and Jennifer was sitting there, legs crossed, concern in her eyes.

"You're a crazy bitch, you know?" she said, and El nodded.

She got out of the water weak and shivered, so Jen got up and caught a towel that was nearby to give it to her.

"Whose is this?" El asked. Jennifer shrugged.

"No idea."

Both girls smiled. El dried as fast as she could with shaky fingers and they went back to their bunk together. Jennifer had to help El into dry clothes. It had been a while since El had to reach so far for

someone, and she felt drained. If there was something coming to Hawkins, she'd need to be better prepared than she was now.

"You know I was just waiting for an opportunity to touch your boobs, right?" Jennifer joked after she helped El put her pajamas on and both girls giggled.

"Don't blame you," El replied. "I feel like touching them all the time."

They giggled more and Bonnie opened the door of the closet they were using.

"Girls, for the love of God, we need to be up in *five hours*!"

They shushed and followed Bonnie back to the room, but instead of going to her own bed, Jennifer laid by El's side, both girls face to face.

"You know you can count on me for anything, right?" Jennifer whispered. Their foreheads were touching. At night, Jen's eyes got this dark shade of blue that was really pretty.

"I know," El answered. That didn't mean she would tell her more than she needed to know, but El didn't need to go into details. Jennifer smiled. "Don't worry, okay?"

Even though they both knew that was impossible, El wanted to follow her mom's advice. If things were to get ugly, she'd like to enjoy the peace for as long as possible.

[...]

Will Byers

Callie had quite the pair of lungs; Will could hear her all the way from here. El was gone, but he still had his hand above his chest. The scar itched every now and then, but lately it just felt weird.

It was a windy night that blew his hair from his forehead. They were still talking.

Find us-

Callie was still crying too, so Will looked back at the house. He made a promise. He was strong. His feet moved.

He only needed five steps to open the door and be back inside, away from the voices and the pull. It made him feel both relieved and anxious, but he kept going despite the conflict.

Will only stopped at the door of his former room where his mom was trying to calm Callie down.

"Want some help?" he said, startling Joyce a bit. She smiled when she saw him.

"It's just a diaper change," she said. "Don't worry."

Will stepped inside. She was changing Callie on El's bed, so he sat on the other side, held his mom's trembling hand. A new baby fifteen years later, she was clearly tired.

"Let me help," Will said gently, and Joyce sighed.

"Okay," she smiled. "Here," she handed him the baby wipes and then touched his face, pushing his hair back with gentle fingers before she started to give him instructions of what to do.

He followed it with determination, enjoying the sharpness of the focus, how it muffled the voices. El was right, he could do it, he could resist. And he would.

3. it's crawling back to life

Author's note: Here's for capítulo dois! Uh-Uh! Hella long, by the way. I'll let you know that chapter 3 will probably be posted after Christmas, okay? .-.

I really appreciate you guys reading and enjoying and I'm anxious to see what you think of this chapter. I love getting your reviews, please don't leave me, okay? And for the guest that thinks that the Mileven dream is over, just bear with me, will you? They are just 15, there are plenty of time for things to work out! ^^

Enjoy the chapter!

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2. it's crawling back to life

July, 1986

Will Byers

The alarm rang at exactly 8 a.m. and Will Byers knocked it off the nightstand with numb fingers. It didn't stop ringing. Another morning he was forced to open his eyes and go be responsible. Sighing, he got out of bed and turned that goddamn thing off, placing it back on the nightstand.

"You know, if you keep doing that you're going to break Ellie's clock and I'm not gonna blame her for breaking your hand," his mom said from the pink rocking chair she was sitting in, feeding baby Callie.

Oh, yeah, he did claim his bedroom back, only while his sister was away, though the room didn't even *feel* like his anymore.

"Good morning, mom," Will greeted in the middle of a yawn. Joyce smiled.

"Good morning, baby. Coffee will be ready in just a few minutes."

"Okay," he said already leaving the room scratching the back of his neck.

Will headed to the bathroom. Now that he was up, he desperately needed to take a leak. He went on with his morning routine in a half sleep state. Mid-summer and he had to wake up early, go to work. Sometimes he really agreed with Hop, mornings *should* be just for coffee and contemplation.

He washed his face last, cold water poking him out of this trance, and looked in the mirror.

"Be your best self today, William." Which considering his track record wouldn't be so hard. He might have gotten a little edgy, but he still was the same good Will from before the demogorgon.

"Jesus, kid, have you ever heard of haircuts?" Hop said as way of hello when Will joined them in the kitchen. "Even the Henderson boy did."

Will pushed the hair from his eyes.

"I found out that this look is very attractive, excuse me," he replied getting his own cup of coffee and sitting down.

"Says who?" questioned Hop. It was a legit question that made Jonathan chuckle.

"His clients," Jon answered for him, though not *only* his clients said that. The Chief just hummed, knowing better than to start wandering in what the hell was the Byers boys' sexuality.

"Wanna ride to work?" he offered instead, and Will shook his head, mouth busy with toast and eggs to answer right away.

"It's alright, I'm rolling to Mike's, we're going together because he needs some new music or something."

"Get ready, I'll drop you at the Garden Square."

There wasn't much discussion when Hopper was in father mode like that, so Will just ate his breakfast and got his backpack. Jonathan was going to the market and mom would go check the lake trailer just to make sure that everything was okay. Will kissed Callie goodbye and waited for Hop in the truck, using the time to put on his

roller skates.

Before he decided to help El learn how to skate to improve her chances of getting into summer camp, last time Will had put skates on was about five years ago. He didn't like it at the time, as everything his father had him doing had that effect, but thanks to El a new pair of skates was the first thing he bought with his own savings besides comic books and D&D supplies. Five months later, Will guessed the activity grew on him.

"Call if anything comes up, okay?" Hopper said when he parked right in front of Lexi's house.

"What could possibly come up in this town?" Will joked, but was cut by a death stare.

"Seriously, William?"

Will looked down and then out the window, where he saw Lexi sitting alone on a swing. He turned to Hop and smiled.

"Okay, bye!" he said opening the door and hopping out. "Thanks for the ride!"

Hopper rolled his eyes, but didn't stick around to give Will more credit. As for the boy, he headed towards Lexi, who had looked up and saw him.

"Someone's got the blues," he commented standing by her side. It was hard to walk in grass with skates on. Lexi smiled sadly.

"This is the worst summer ever," she whined. "I can't go to gymnastic camp nor cheerleading camp, Jen and Elle are gone, Paula had to go to college early and I'm stuck with a bunch of *boys*."

Will gasped, hand to his chest.

"Hurtful," he said and she rolled her eyes.

"You know what I mean," Lexi said.

"Look, why don't you come to the store later? We can have ice cream

for lunch or something, and I might even put the new Madonna record to play while you're there."

Lexi's eyes shone.

"You guys already have it?" she asked excitedly.

"Came yesterday from the city," Will told her. "So?"

"I'll be there in a few," she guaranteed with a big smile. Will stepped back to the sidewalk.

"See?" he said before rolling out. "Not so bad to have some boy friends."

Will bolted before she could say anything else, being almost late to go meet Mike. He crossed the block on Roosevelt and found himself in the beginning of the street that led to the cul-de-sac where the Wheelers and Sinclairs lived.

He was passing by Lucas's place without even noticing, but something different caught his attention. A black car with a Vermont plaque, to be more specific. The front door of the house was open. Will rolled slower until he reached Mike's house and when Holly opened the door, he was still looking over to Lucas's house waiting to see who would show up.

"Hi, Will!" Holly greeted, and he looked at her. She was grinning, and with a good reason.

"Wow! Where did your teeth go?" he exclaimed, and she laughed.

"They fell out! I got 5 dollars for each, and I already have other two about to fall."

"Careful there, Hol, the tooth fairy might go bankrupt because of you," he said seriously, and she laughed even more.

"You're funny, Will," she said, and then got on her tiptoes getting closer. "I know it was mom who gave me the money."

Will dropped down on one knee to look at her in the eyes better.

"But how do you know if she isn't the tooth fairy's associate?"

Holly's eyes went wide with the revelation and she looked as if something entirely new had been shown to her. Kids were such interesting little creatures.

"Hol, is Mike home?" Will asked looking over at Lucas's just out of habit and that was when he saw her.

Will got up, focus all on the car a few houses down and the most beautiful girl he had ever seen his entire life.

"Yeah, he's getting ready for work," Holly informed. Will patted her hair.

"Tell him I'm waiting outside, okay?" he said already stepping back and rolling towards her.

Maya Sinclair. The most beautiful girl ever with her curly hair framing her face, the perfectly dark skin and the impossibly black eyes. Will rolled behind her and stopped by her other side.

"Well, hello there, neighbor," he greeted. That could've been worse.

Maya looked at him up and down and it clearly took her a while to recognize him. Maybe he really had changed some.

"Will Byers," she said smiling. "Long time no see."

"Yeah, it's been quite a while," he replied, seeing the box she was holding. "Need a hand?"

"Already got two, but…" she let him take the box that in reality wasn't even that heavy, and Will walked with her to the front door. "You can leave it in the hall," Maya instructed and he did as she said.

"So, are you just passing by or…?" he asked and she smiled.

Maya Sinclair's smile could power a small tribe like the one her mother came from.

"I'm staying for three weeks," she told him.

Three weeks. He could hold his cool for three weeks. Maybe even make some progress.

"Well, since you're staying for *so long*," Will started, glancing over her shoulders because he had seen some movement, but it was just Mike trying to catch his attention. "How about we-"

"Byers!" Lucas interrupted suddenly at the door. "*What in the shit are you doing here?*"

"Good morning to you too, my dear friend," Will replied instead and reached for the door handle, pushed Lucas back with his free hand. "Excuse me."

He closed the door on Lucas's face inching closer to Maya, and he *saw* the spark that shone in her eyes. Maybe he was doing it right.

"As I was saying, maybe we could go somewhere this week, like the movies or something, what do you think?"

"I don't know…" Maya said in player mode. Will recognized that tone because he used it *a lot*. "There is just *so much* to do in this town, my agenda might be full."

"You're a resourceful woman," Will said flashing what he hoped was his charming smile. It was rather hard to function when he cared about the catch. "I'm sure you'll figure out some time for me."

Maya laughed. What a magical sound.

"Will Byers, who'd tell you'd become such a *player*."

He didn't answer that and she reached for the door getting even closer to him in order to go inside. Maya was about El's height, which was actually perfect for Will. Most girls he knew were his height or taller.

"We'll see," she said opening the door. Lucas was still there, arms crossed.

Will waited for her to close the door to go back to business. Mike was waiting for him on the sidewalk in front of the Sinclairs' house

leaning against his bike and wearing a bored expression.

"If I get late for work, Byers, I swear to God," he said as soon as Will rolled closer.

"Why can't anyone greet me properly today? On such a beautiful day!"

Mike rolled his eyes and the two friends rolled downtown.

"You know Lucas will try everything to keep you away from her, right?" Mike said as they went. "He has a serious code about friends dating his relatives."

"Who said he has a say on anything?" Will replied a bit annoyed. "Maya will do whatever the hell she wants, and I will not stop her if she wants to do *me*."

"Ew, thanks for the visual," Mike replied fast and Will laughed.

"You're such a prude, right Mike?" he provoked. "Didn't even *talk* about sex with El until a year ago, as if you don't have a bunch of *Cosmos* and *Playboys* hidden in your room."

Mike's face turned red.

"How do you-"

"Know?" Will completed. "You think Nancy bought all those magazines herself?" He shook his head. "Jonathan bought most of them. Brought some for me too and all."

Mike nodded.

"Makes sense," he said. They turned on the main avenue where both their works were situated, but passed by the accounting office where Mike was wasting most of his days (for that was what he was doing in Will's opinion: wasting).

"I know it does," Will replied and they stopped in front of the record store. "I gotta go through the back. You know where to find what you're looking for?"

"Yeah, don't mind me," Mike left his bike in front of the store and Will headed to the back door.

"I'm here and I'm early!" he announced finding a chair to sit and change to his sneakers.

"By *five minutes*, you want a reward?" his boss, Solomon, replied. Such a nice fellow. His face appeared in the open door. He looked like someone right from the 60's with the heavy moustache and dark, parted hair. "Come quick, Byers, your client is here."

"I know," he said tying his shoelaces. He put his backpack and roller skates in the corner of the office, got a water bottle from the fridge and went to the store, but surprisingly Mike wasn't the only one there.

"I don't know if I should be annoyed about the movement you attract or grateful," Solomon whispered to him as Will waved at two girls from school who were looking over and giggling from the heavy metal section.

"I'm your best salesman," Will replied. "You love me just as much as they do."

Solomon looked back at the store. Mike, in the blues section, was the only one who didn't constantly glance over at Will with dreamy eyes. There was a guy more in the back who came every two or three days just to flirt. Solomon suspected that he only bought some records to cover the fact that he was checking Will out. To be fair, it was good to have faithful clients, even if it was just because of the cute employee.

"Go to work, kid, it's my lunch time."

"It's 9:30!" Will exclaimed, checking his watch.

"Brunch, whatever," Solomon corrected, but it sounded more like a whine before he headed to the back.

Will shook his head and then took a sip of water. It was time to work anyway.

The two girls came closer to the counter with a few discs in hand and spread them in front of him. Each one was very different from the other.

"Hi Will," said one of them, the tallest one. They would be freshmen next school year, but Will remembered them from middle school. "So my cousin is turning 16 this weekend and he's really into rock. Which one you think he would like?"

"That depends," he replied checking the albums they had picked. That wasn't a selection for a rock guy, that was a selection for *them*, but he rolled with it. "If your cousin is into something more melodic and girls crying in the background, definitely Bon Jovi. If he likes something heavier, Black Sabbath was a good pick, now…" he picked the last album, checked the cover. "I haven't listened to Poison yet." Will put the record down and leaned closer to them. "If you come back in a couple of days I can definitely tell you what I think about them."

The girls giggled and he smiled. Damn, he was *good*. Mike finally finished picking his discs and he got closer with five or six albums from Ella Fitzgerald to Stevie Wonder. Will got him a plastic bag.

"George Benson and Eric Clapton I can understand," Will said putting everything in the bag. "But Diana Ross is a bit of a surprise. What do you need these for?"

"None of your business," Mike replied, which could only mean one out of two things: his mom or El.

"Wow, so defensive," he said, taking Mike's money and putting it in cash register. "Look, I hope you understand that my sister won't get back with you even with the most beautiful guitar solo, you know?"

Mike sighed dramatically and just stepped back.

"I gotta go to work," he said.

"I'm warning you, Wheeler!" Will pressed. It was a joke, but a bit of a serious one. "I won't let her!"

Mike gave him the finger before the door closed after him and Will

smiled at the girls.

"It's serious, he's an asshole. He's my best friend, but he's an asshole. Did you guys choose?"

"We're picking Black Sabbath," one of them said, handing him some cash.

"But we're definitely coming back to know what you think of Poison," the other added and Will nodded charmingly.

"Well, that's an excellent choice," he said, not being very specific about which choice was excellent. "Your cousin will like it."

"I'm sure," the taller girl said. They got their change and their album and left with giggles and glances back. More people went into the store.

Only then the guy who was in the back came closer. Hercules. He was a faithful one, came two to three times a week, always buying something different or showing Will something new.

"You're such a charmer, aren't you?" Hercules said. So far today, only two people had greeted Will with 'hello', he was counting.

"I'm really not," Will replied going around the counter. Hercules nodded.

"We do what we gotta do, right?"

Will shrugged abstaining from giving an official answer. Whatever the hell Hercules meant by that didn't seem to resonate with what Will believed.

For a moment, no one said anything and the more Hercules stared at Will, the more he blushed. He was going away for college in a few weeks, some Ivy League school Will supposed was a place where people started to be themselves. Well, Will had learned the hard way that life was an ephemeral thing. There was no such thing as time to waste.

Hercules cleared his throat and fished something from his pocket.

"Uh, I made you a mix," he said offering a K7 tape for Will.

"Oh?" Will exclaimed, taking the mix. Its title was *Hercules's super alternative mix for Will* and it made him smile.

"It's kind of a weird mix, but I think there are some things you really might like," he said. Will opened his mouth to say something, but Hercules shook his head. "Consider it a late birthday present."

Will smiled feeling his cheeks grow warm.

"Thanks."

Someone in the store scoffed.

"Fags," the person said, and even though it looked like Hercules wanted to disappear, Will just turned around annoyed.

Ah.

Troy.

Unsurprising.

"It's funny, you know," Will began walking towards him, passing by Hercules. "How *brave* you get when you know my sister is not around. So very *macho*, aren't you?"

He stopped in front of Troy, who was a head taller than him and only narrowed his eyes as Will spoke.

"You've been calling me that since we were in grade school, so convinced without even knowing me or any of my friends and you think that *affects* me?" he continued. "My own *father* calls me that, as if it would offend me just because I'm different from him, but you?" Will got closer and Troy stepped back. "What are you afraid of?"

"Why would I be afraid of anything, Byers?" Troy spat and Will paid close attention to his body language, how he leaned closer and was overly annoyed at his words.

"I don't know," Will said shrugging. "Maybe this."

Without warning, Will reached for the back of Troy's neck, bringing his face closer and landing him a kiss straight on the mouth. It ended as quickly as it started, and Troy pushed him away with a disgusted face that made Will laugh.

"You're dead, Byers," he snickered and Will shrugged.

"Been there, done that, no news," he dismissed and leaned against one of the record shelves shaking his head. "You're just *so stupid*, aren't you?"

Troy stepped back absolutely pissed.

"Stay away from me or I'll kill you."

"Yeah, whatever," Will turned his back to Troy and went behind the counter again, where he was supposed to stay unless a client asked for help. Hercules was still there wide-eyed and so was Troy. Will frowned at him. "You're still here?"

After all, that was *Will's* workplace. Angrily, Troy turned around and stormed out of the store, making Will roll his eyes. Hercules let out a nervous giggle.

"That was bold," he said impressed, getting close. Will dismissed.

"He's full of shit, sometimes all you have to do is fight back."

"You didn't fight back," Hercules exclaimed, his voice raised a bit. "You left a fucking statement."

"I guess," Will said.

"How did you do that?" he continued, wondering. "Hell, I wish I was that brave."

"Oh, it's easy," Will began to explain. "All you need is a little anger and a strong sense of what is right and wrong in here," he pointed to his head and then to his heart. "And here. And you also need a low tolerance for bullshit. I didn't have that before, but things changed."

"Don't they always?"

Will smiled.

"I guess I don't have the time to bother about what people think of me anymore, you know? About who I love or who I don't and stuff. I just wanna be me."

"And that would be…?" Hercules tried and Will's smile crooked mischievously.

"Nice try," he said. He was still holding the tape Hercules had made for him and he looked it over again before looking up. "I'll listen to this, and then I'll tell you what I think."

"I hope you like it," Hercules said sweetly.

"I probably will," Will replied.

Hercules kept his gaze on him for a stretched moment and then sighed.

"I better get going," he said. "I'll come back in a few days."

"I know," Will replied and watched the redness grow on Hercules's cheeks. "This place is addicting," he added and saw the guy sigh relieved.

"Yeah, it is," he said stepping back. "See you around, Will."

Will waved a goodbye and watched Hercules go, the tape still in his hand. After Hercules was out of sight, Will opened the K7's case to see what were the tracks, but before he could read the first track of the A side, he felt a pain in his stomach, as if something had pinched him so hard he leaned over.

He held on to the counter, head down, the tape fell on the floor. First things first: he had to *breathe*. In. Out. In-

William.

Will looked up and to the door, where the call seemed to come from, but no one was there. He forced his eyes a bit, certain that he'd seen some movement, but the sidewalk was empty, at least what he could

see through the store's glass window. A shiver went up his spine and he felt the humidity of the upside down on his skin in a flash, the way his mind played tricks on him a couple of years ago.

That was when he saw it. Someone looking right at him through the glass, under an ash storm outside. Will didn't know that person, he was sure, but at the same time, he felt an oddly familiarity, like a long lost family member or something.

"Hey!" Will called, going around the counter and towards the front door. "Hey, who are you?"

The person didn't move as they observed Will yank the door open and step outside, one hand against the glass. They looked like a shock of color against a grey world, a man in a red plaid, jeans and boots who smiled at him with impossibly white teeth. Everything inside Will screamed 'PREDATOR!' and yet he wasn't afraid. Why wasn't he afraid?

"Hello, William," the man said, and with the blink of an eye, he was gone, just the slippery mark of his hand on the glass and the ash by Will's feet to tell the story.

His stomach hurt.

Confused, Will looked around, trying to make some sense of what just happened. Hawkins still seemed the same under the July sun, across the street kids laughed and played in front of the ice cream shop.

It'd been almost two years since Will had seen glimpses of the Upside-down like that, ever since the demon invaded his home and almost killed Max, almost killed *him* for trying to protect her.

He reached for the itching scar on his chest. It was like it was burning again, same way it burned when he was clawed that day. It should've killed him, but it didn't, no one knew why so far. Maybe he should find out.

Will looked at his watch. Solomon was probably coming back from his break and he still had some cleaning to do, now that the store was empty. Better get to it and leave the weird, supernatural stuff aside.

He didn't even know if he should worry about it now, without El here to guide them.

So Will went back inside, got the mix Hercules had made for him from the floor and went to the back. He put it in the outside pocket of his backpack, got himself a garbage bag and started cleaning the store.

There was litter everywhere. Incredible how fast a place so small could get nasty. He swept the floor, found half full soda cans between discs, and even forgotten sandwiches among promotional bowls of music.

Solomon got back halfway through Will's cleaning and just sat there chewing gum, absently going through a Rolling Stone magazine.

"This place needs a couple of trash cans or something," Will said passing by him to go to the back. "It's disgusting how people just leave litter all over."

"Stop bothering me about environment stuff," Solomon replied not even looking up and Will rolled his eyes.

"It's not environment, all I'm saying-" he stopped short, hand on the handle of the back door that led to the alley, where the trash bin was. "Never mind."

Will stepped outside again. The buildings downtown weren't nearly as tall as the ones in Indianapolis, and the alley wasn't as dark and intimidating as a DC comic book would make it look like. He put the trash in the bin. The sun was hitting the alley in a funny angle, casting the shadow of the radio tower over the side of the neighbor building like a tall, crooked strip.

A noise caught Will's attention and he turned around looking for the stray that usually hid in there, but he didn't see any tail going away, just Troy coming in his direction. Will sighed.

"What now?" he whined.

Troy looked conflicted as he walked over to Will. He was silent, which was a first, and seemed almost ethereal, which made Will

frown. Was Troy in the Upside-down now?

"*What*?" he insisted, and before he could say anything else, Troy pushed him against the wall and kissed him – for real this time, with fire and lots of tongue.

Okay, he wasn't in the Upside-down. But it still seemed like he had ended up in some parallel universe, because Troy? Was kissing him? That didn't make any sense. When Troy let go, Will was frowning at him.

"If you tell a soul," he said, still standing unnecessarily close. "I *will* fucking kill you."

Will chuckled. That was more likely. Didn't mean he felt intimidated, though.

He watched Troy leave, this time with a better understanding of the guy that grew up with him. Will remembered how it was to live with fear of himself – though his self-fear was for a completely different reason than what Troy (and even Hercules) was going through.

Will shook his head and saw the stray sat across from him, its yellow eyes observing him lazily. He dismissed it and went back inside right on cue to hear a familiar voice coming from the store.

"Is Will here?"

"Will?" Solomon echoed and the boy saw him putting down his magazine. As soon as he saw who was there, he made a face. "Oh, for fuck's sake! *WILL*!"

"I'm here," he mumbled, joining Solomon in the store.

"You have another groupie," the boss informed, and Will shook his head.

"I'm not a groupie," Lexi complained leaning on the counter. She was so short that she had to keep on her tiptoes. "Where is it?"

"Later," Will said. "Right now I could really use some ice cream."

"Okay," Lexi said pouting a little and he followed her outside and across the street. "Please, tell me you didn't lie to me and the album is really there."

"Lexi," Will held her hand and made her turn around.

"What?" she said and he gestured towards the store. It took her a moment to see what he was showing her, and the sight of the Madonna album in the shop window brightened her face. "Oh, my God!"

"I know, I know, but can I have me some waffles first?" he led her to the ice cream shop.

They got some waffles and ice cream and sat outside waiting for the other boys to arrive. One portion was seriously huge for one person only, so they decided to share it, but the logistic had to be pretty neat, because Will absolutely hated Lexi's Dulce de leche scoops.

"*Cómo no te gusta el Dulce de leche?*" Lexi exclaimed. She always started to talk in Spanish when she got offended.

"It's just *so* sweet! I can't," Will replied.

"That's why it's so good! The *sweetness*," she pointed a spoon at him.

"I'd rather stay with my strawberry and cream," he said.

Lexi rolled her eyes, but slid closer to him. She was wearing a jeans jacket and short shorts, showing off her tanned legs.

"You think we can all meet later tonight at the square?" she wondered. "I have a surprise for you all."

"I guess," he said, looking at her. "What is it?"

Lexi smiled mischievously and opened her jacket, showing a transparent plastic bag with something green inside…

"Holy shit!" Will reached for the bag, but Lexi slapped his hand out. "That's a lot of weed!"

"Paula gave it to me before she left, and I thought we could try some."

"Try?" he said raising an eyebrow. Lexi shrugged.

"I'm actually counting on Dustin for a few lessons," she confessed, and Will laughed.

"You think Lucas would be kind enough to invite Maya over tonight?" he asked and Lexi raised both eyebrows.

"Oh, yeah, Maya is in town!" she said not nearly as excited as she intended to sound. "How long have you had a crush on her again?"

Will sighed shaking his head.

"My whole life, I guess?" he said trying to remember the first time he felt like Maya Sinclair was *the one*. He was pretty sure it was in the spring of 1976, when he had just turned 5, but Lexi would probably laugh at his precision. "She's just so beautiful, I can't even function," Will confessed without a filter and he *felt* Lexi shrink by his side.

"Yeah, I know," she said avoiding eye contact. "How long is she staying?"

"Three weeks."

Lexi looked up at him.

"You're going to try your luck, aren't you?" she affirmed. "Man, Lucas is going to be *pissed*."

"I don't know why he cares so much, his rules are dumb."

"I don't know, Byers, why did you get so mad at Mike for being a dick to Ellie?" Lexi replied in a heartbeat and Will was suddenly in defensive mode.

"Uh, El is my *sister*, the rules are different!"

"You two have been family for six months, Maya and Lucas share a surname since birth!"

"Look, I know he's your best friend, but you defending him is getting super annoying," Will cut, voice suddenly soft and Lexi closed her mouth also annoyed.

"It's just…" Lexi sighed. Her nose was covered with freckles that she always tried to hide with foundation, which he found a shame. They made such a beautiful contrast with her eyes. "I guess I will have to enjoy you while I can."

Will smiled and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Maria Alessandra Solaris, don't be like that, you are my girl," he said, bringing her closer despite the heat.

"Yeah, and you are a whore," she replied pouting. He shook his head.

"You have no idea," Will replied, fingers on her chin to make her look up before he kissed her. She responded for just a few seconds.

"I do have an idea, actually," Lexi said, because frankly she had been there for most of his flings ever since she threw that party almost a year ago, and she knew more about Will's love life than anyone in Hawkins, same way he knew about hers.

"But you are right, though, I should settle down a bit, at least while Maya is around," Will said thoughtfully and Lexi shook her head.

"I never said that," she corrected. "But that's a good idea."

Will nodded.

"Thought so," he said.

Most of their ice cream had melted and now the pink of his strawberry was mixing with Lexi's yellow Dulce on a half-eaten homemade waffle. Will looked over across the street to his work place. From here, they could barely see the hand mark on the glass, but if you squeezed your eyes the right way…

Will turned to Lexi again. She was fishing a piece of waffle from the plate. What a healthy lunch they were having, huh?

"Lexi," Will said. She hummed. "I'm thinking about settling down, for real. You know, while Maya is here."

Lexi didn't look at him. He continued talking.

"But I'm thinking about doing it tomorrow, you know?"

Unable to hide, she smiled and looked at him.

"You are such a whore, Will By-" she started, but she was cut by his lips on hers once again. Well, she wouldn't complain.

"Oh, great!" they heard Dustin exclaim. "Now that we got rid of Mike and El we have to live with Will and Lexi's PDA."

"That's actually good," Lucas said. "That way I know he's not going after my cousin."

Will and Lexi didn't stop kissing right away, but Lucas's comment did make them chuckle. Good luck with that.

Will *should* go straight home after work, but what he ended up doing was to go back to Mike's for dinner before they'd meet the others at the square, as Lexi made them all promise to go. She was taking that summer without girls very seriously, and they had a feeling she would stick around for most days.

He did make sure to see if Jonathan would stay home that night, though, because for the past couple of weeks Jon and Nancy had been going on road trips and busy hiking without giving anyone any details as to why they had to be so mysterious about it.

As it had been happening for the past months, they spent a lot of time listening to Holly go on about *Star Wars*, her most recent obsession, and to be fair neither Mike nor Will minded. Particularly, it was their favorite movies as well.

It was around 8 p.m., after the sun already had set, that they finally met Lucas to go meet Dustin and Lexi, no Maya to make Will's night. The three of them found them on the merry-go-round much like that time after Lexi's birthday party the year before; Will spotted the bag on Dustin's crossed legs, who was saying something that made Lexi

laugh while he rolled a joint.

"I swear to God they tried to keep me out of it, but you can't live with the Hendersons and not learn how to roll a joint," he was saying. The boys had heard that story many times. "Femke made sure to point that out last winter. Hey guys! I was just telling Lexi how fucked up my family is!"

Oh, they knew. Being the youngest of five brothers in a family of hippies, Dustin had a lot of stories to tell. Some they even lived with him. Even his grandparents were kind of crazy.

"So, which brother took it upon himself to teach you the marijuana art?" Lexi asked accepting the joint he had just finished and offered to her.

"Femke," he answered.

"The one in Chicago?" she asked and he nodded.

"A little before he had Andre," Dustin answered. "He and his wife were the most good vibes people in the world, but they toned it down once she got pregnant."

Lexi lit the joint and they all joined them on the merry-go-round.

"Is that your surprise?" asked Lucas. "A bag of weed?"

"You bet," she said, passing him the joint.

"Sweet," he said, accepting it. "Where did you get it, though?"

"Paula," Lexi told him. "She said I deserved some consolation prize for everyone who's leaving me this summer."

"Oh, how nice of her!" Mike joked.

To be fair, none of them besides Dustin had ever smoked weed before, but Will used to light his father's cigarettes for him when he still lived with them – which his mom *hated* but Lonnie found the funniest thing. Particularly, Will never minded the cigars much, though El hated them with all her strength.

"I also called you guys here to plan our summer," Lexi said. "Ellie and Jen won't be here for my birthday, which is awful, and my parents will be home at the time, but I still want to do something fun."

"We can go to the lake," Dustin suggested. Will shook his head.

"Only if it's in someone else's property, because our trailer is rented, remember?"

"I can talk to Steve," Mike said. "His family owns like, two thirds of the lake and they are all in Florida right now."

"Dude, if you get a pass with Steve Harrington, we just use his pool," Lucas said, punching Mike's arm lightly. "That way we won't even have to worry about some stupid dugong who doesn't know how to swim drowning on our watch."

"You heard him, Dustin, no going near the pool," Will provoked, and they all laughed.

"Hey, that was a total accident, I had it under control!"

Mike chuckled.

"Yeah, because shaking your arms and legs all the time while screaming higher than tiny Lexi here as the Chief tried to get you out of the lake was *super* under control," he said, and everyone laughed even more, maybe more than how it actually was funny.

"That was all acting, Wheeler," Dustin insisted. "All. Acting."

"Yeah, we'll pretend we believe you," Will said turning around and laying down on the ride.

"Good idea, dude," Lucas said, doing the same and laying head to head with Will. Soon, they were all doing the same, watching the stars above them.

"When is El coming back?" Mike asked before taking a long drag of the joint.

"I'm not telling you," Will answered. "You stay away from her, you

hear me?"

Dustin hummed.

"That's kinda impossible," he observed.

Someone passed the joint to Will.

"Look, I'm just asking," Mike tried to justify.

"Yeah, sure," Will replied. "For whom was the discs you bought today, Wheeler? You didn't have them when we came back." Mike didn't say anything. "I bet they are for that Spencer girl. Mike, did you cheat on El with Spencer?"

"*What?*" Mike exclaimed, as if it was the most absurd accusation ever. "I didn't! I would never cheat on El! Look, I accept the punch, okay, but to say I'd cheat on El is just borderline insane!"

"Well, she told me she doesn't understand why you were being such a dick," Will argued. Mike shook his head.

"It's complicated, okay?" he said. "I had a lot on my mind."

"And now you don't?" Will questioned. Mike opened his mouth to answer, but wasn't fast enough. "That's what I thought. Ask me about El when your mind is clear."

Mike sighed frustrated and Lexi patted his hand in solidarity, being one of the few people who knew what was going on.

"Will does have a point, though," Dustin said, and some of them hummed in agreement.

They were silent for a few minutes, just watching the sky and smoking weed. It tasted and smelled so different from normal cigars, but it put their minds afloat, light as a feather in the large square in front of Lexi's house. The joint ended up in Will's hands again and he dragged it twice, eyes on the sky. The world seemed to slow down. Before he even had control, he already was talking.

"Troy is super gay," he said. It took a heartbeat too long for the others

to understand him.

"*Who*?" asked Lexi.

"Troy," Will repeated.

"Bully Troy?" Lucas asked, just to make sure.

"Yep."

"How do you know?" Mike asked frowning at the sky.

"Because he kissed me today," Will told them.

"Wait, wait, wait," Dustin sat up. "I heard that *you* had kissed him."

"How did you hear *that*?" Will exclaimed.

"Uh, have you forgotten that Hercules was the one who got me the job at the museum?"

"Oh, yeah. I have."

"So you kissed Troy to piss him off?" Dustin checked.

"Yeah, and it backfired!" Will replied, maybe a bit too loud. He cleared his throat before speaking again. "A while after, he cornered me and kissed me. I'm telling you, he's super into guys."

"Or maybe he's into you, he wouldn't be the first," Lucas shrugged.

"Why, thank you, Lucas," Will said smiling, hand on his chest. "But no, gay Troy is a fact, mark my words."

"I'm not surprised, are you guys surprised?" asked Lexi, and they all made different sounds that meant that they were indeed surprised. They did not see that coming, to be quite honest. "How can men be so clueless?" she wondered. "Don't answer."

Dustin, who was ready to say something, closed his mouth. The joint was passed to him, and after him it was passed to Lexi. It was almost ending.

"What if he tries to kiss you again?" he asked instead. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'll tell him to fuck the fuck off," Will answered, as if it was obvious. "One, I don't like him, two, I'd rather focus on Maya and three, I have no time for other people's closets."

"Oh, is that what you're doing with Hercules?" Lexi provoked.

They all laughed, teasing Will with friendly punches and ruffling his hair. It was being a good night, the laugh died slowly and sweetly.

"Guys?" Lexi called and she sighed. Will turned his head to look at her profile. "Please, don't leave me out of your adventures this summer, okay?"

Sympathetically, Will held her hand.

"Don't worry, Lexi," Lucas said reaching to ruffle her hair. "You're part of the team now. The whole team."

They stayed in the square for a couple of hours, and then it was too late for Will to go back home. Since he came back, Mirkwood was never an option with the sun down. Sure that was a trauma he *should* treat, but so far he had managed to avoid the shortcut, and he could pass another night avoiding it.

"You can sleep at my place," Mike offered. "Your things are there anyway, and my dad's old Lay-Z-Boy was retired."

"A Lay-Z-Boy, tempting," Will said smiling. "I'll just have to call home."

"Of course," Mike agreed.

"And you're not gonna get any info on El from me," Will added, making his friend roll his eyes.

"You know, I think you shouldn't smoke so much weed being so small," Mike observed, putting an arm around Will's shoulder to guide him to his home.

"That's not true!" Will exclaimed. "Look at Lexi, she's totally fine!"

Lexi looked fine, indeed, but Will *was* reacting weirdly to the drugs, so Mike and Lucas flanked him, escorting him to the Wheeler's. It was actually good not to have to think about the way or the time or anything, because his stomach was hurting a little and the whispers were *driving him mad*.

"Lucas, who else fell in love with me?" he wondered out loud, leaning against his friend. "You said more people fell in love with me."

"I actually said that there are more people *interested* in you, not *in love* with you," Lucas replied.

"Isn't that the same?"

"No!" both Lucas and Mike said at the same time, and the three of them laughed.

"You didn't answer me, though," Will said when they stopped in front of Lucas's house.

"Start paying better attention, Byers," his friend said. "For someone who dates so many people you're blissfully unaware of your attraction."

"Hah!" Will pointed at him, and then frowned. "Wait, are you trying to distract me so I don't hit on your cousin?"

"Go to sleep, William," he said laughing.

"He's totally trying to distract me, isn't he?" Will asked Mike, who nodded.

"Damn right he is, you're not even *that* attractive."

"Now that is a full-on lie!"

Mike shook his head.

"And there Nancy was worried that Steve would be a bad influence on *me*," he commented. They already had reached his house.

Mike and Will got into the Wheelers' house through the basement, where Holly still was awake coloring on her sketchbook in the fort that used to be El's. Holly smiled when she saw them go in and didn't question when Mike asked her to go get the wireless phone for them instead of going himself to get it, even if that meant that Mrs. Wheeler would see that her youngest wasn't in bed yet.

"Your drawings are very good," Will told her when she went back down, and Holly beamed.

"You think?" she said with shiny blue eyes. "Teacher said that I use way too much red, but no one complained about Caravaggio's excess of brown in everything he did."

"You know about Caravaggio?" Will said surprised and Mike scoffed.

"Uncle Klay has been giving her Taschen books since he found out she could read," he said and Holly smiled proudly. "Those heavy things drive dad mad."

"Mostly because he's never liked uncle very much," Holly whispered. Mike raised both eyebrows.

"You've noticed?" he asked and she nodded.

"Yeah, it's obvious," she said. It really was obvious.

"Sometimes I wonder what happened with them to hate each other so much," Mike wondered. "I know they went to high school together, but… I don't know."

"High school rivalry, that's juicy!" Will exclaimed impressed, the phone forgotten in his hand. He didn't even call home yet. "Maybe we should try and find out, like we did with mom and Hop!"

Mike made a face.

"I don't know if I'm interested in my dad's teen life," he said. Will shook his head.

"Wheeler, you can't just throw around stuff like that and not expect us to get curious," he said, Holly nodded by his side.

"I could ask him and tell you guys," Holly offered, eager to join them. "I'm the baby, no one ever suspects I'm actually paying attention."

Mike was shaking his head no, but stopped midway.

"Oh?" he simply said, and his baby sister smiled mischievously.

"I'm the perfect assault," she said proudly, and after a second trying to figure out what she meant, the boys started to laugh.

"Asset, Hol," Mike said with tears in his eyes. "The word you're looking for is 'asset'," he corrected her and her face got all red.

"HOLLY WHEELER, I WON'T SAY AGAIN!" they heard Karen shout from upstairs, and Holly's eyes widened.

"Go to bed, Fozzie," Mike patted her hair. "We'll talk about this plan of yours tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," she said and hugged him quickly. "Your eyes are really red, big brother."

"It's just the wind outside," he diverged. Lucky Holly wasn't old enough to understand some things, she just nodded.

"Don't forget to put the phone back, or it will lose charge," she said, already going up the stairs. If she hadn't said anything, Will would sleep with the phone in his hand and wouldn't even realize it.

He called home, finally, and told Hopper that he'd stay at Mike's again. The Wheelers' place had been his family's second home for a long time, even before El came along, though it intensified once she was back. Even with Will and Mike's little disagreement last month, their bond was strong, and the sleepovers kept happening. The boys kept talking about art books and how Will was saving money to go to art school in Indianapolis instead of using it to buy a car like the other boys were planning and at some point they just fell asleep on the basement floor, minds drifting with no control in a tidal of paranoia and euphoria all mixed together.

William!

Will woke up in one go, eyes snapping up as if he had just had a nightmare, or maybe had dreamed about falling. For a moment, he didn't know where he was, and it took a while for him to remember what that basement looked like. It was just Mike's snoring that set his mind straight.

The watch said that it was almost 2 a.m. and Will was *starving*. He sat up and looked around, noticing the thin layer of ashes around and on top of him. His hands were tingling, a weird sensation pretty similar to what he felt on his chest. He didn't understand it.

"I could really use some mac and cheese right about now," Mike said, voice hoarse, and Will looked at him.

"Are you reading my mind?"

They went upstairs to look for any leftovers they could find. While they heated what was left of the mac and cheese and the mignon, they found a carton of ice cream, which had been Will's main food for the past couple of days. Being in Mike's house, they had chocolate and peanut butter ice cream, not his favorite, but it looked delicious.

"I don't remember chocolate tasting so good," Will confessed. He and Mike were sitting on the kitchen floor in front of the oven, their backs against the fridge, the carton between them.

"Your memory fails you, Byers," Mike replied.

They ate the dessert first, and they still were hungry when it felt like the mac and cheese was warm enough to be attacked. They even used the same spoon and ate directly from the dish, something Mike knew somewhere in his mind that would drive his mom so mad it'd be borderline dangerous, but there was no turning back now that they'd already started.

"What in the shit are you two doing?" Nancy hushed sounding very alarmed. She was holding a notepad to her chest, had probably come down to get some water, but they didn't hear her coming.

"Eating," Mike answered, trying really hard to speak quietly. "Nancy, we're *starving*."

Will nodded avidly, spoon in his mouth and Nancy frowned as she checked them out with growing concern.

"*Are you high?*" she hissed again, even more alarmed.

"No!" Mike said at the same time Will said – "What? That's crazy!"

"High?" Mike echoed and scoffed. "We're not high!"

"You're totally high," Nancy stated. The boys nodded.

"Totally," Will agreed at the same time Mike said – "You betcha."

She sighed.

"Those beautiful minds," Nancy said shaking her head disapprovingly. "Why would you want to ruin those beautiful minds?"

"What's the harm in a little marinj-" tried Will. "Maryjun, merryjo, weed?"

Mike started to giggle, unable to concentrate on simple tasks, like putting his spoon in the dish instead of the floor.

"Yeah, Nance," he said between giggles, looking at his sister. "You were the one who said that everyone should get wasted at least once in their lives!"

Nancy opened her mouth to protest, but the problem was: she really did say that during a drunk call straight from Florida last spring break, so…

"Yeah, but come on, are you guys really feeling good?" she replied, trying to pass the hot seat to them.

Mike started to say something, and Will felt ready to agree with whatever argument he had in mind, but his stomach was so not having it. He gagged.

"Actually," he said, getting up. "I don't feel right."

Will ran to the closest toilet, crashing on doors and soap holders and

lifting the seat just in time to heave the contents of his stomach in the toilet bowl: pasta, beef, cookies and some leaves even. He felt the cold sweat build on his forehead and soak his hair as everything he had eaten that night went away.

Funny thing was, he didn't remember anyone saying puking was a side effect to weed. The light head? Yes. The hunger? Check. To get a bit paranoid? Of course. But to feel this sick, that was new.

Once he felt that he could breathe again, Will finally looked for the light switch, turned it on. The brightness hurt his eyes a little. He got up with shaky legs and was ready to flush the toilet when he saw something moving among the disgusting content of his stomach. Something he hadn't the displeasure to see for almost two years now.

Will flushed the toilet knowing that the cold sweat on his forehead and the humidity on his arms had nothing to do with getting high, and everything to do with something else entirely. He turned on the tap, washed his mouth and face, looked for some mouthwash in the cabinet and washed his mouth again.

In the mirror, the boy looking at him had nothing of the confidence he had shown the whole day, just confusion and a big deal of fear. Why did the slugs have to come back *now*? He was fine, life was good, why come back?

The voices whispered answers in his ears.

Will looked down at his hands and gagged again, the realization taking the best of him.

Oh, crap.

[...]

Nancy Wheeler

Their feet stepped on the soft soil of Hawkins woods without making much sound – a big change from that fall in 1983, when they braved that same forest for similar reasons. In her hands, Nancy constantly checked both her handmade map based on Terry Ives's erratic guidelines and a compass, always looking up in the hopes that the

sun indicated a different north from the one the needle was showing her.

"We're exactly between my house and Steve's," Jonathan informed when they stopped. "Mirkwood behind us, the labs a bit further. Which way you want to go?"

"I don't know," Nancy said and sighed. "It'd be so much easier if Terry had just given us a sequence to follow."

Jonathan chuckled and they looked at each other, her with her eyebrows raised.

"You can't expect *Ellie's mom* to be specific about anything," he explained. "I mean, you've met the Ives women, what did you think would happen?"

Despite herself, Nancy smiled and looked away, towards where Steve's house was.

"Why would she send us here?" she wondered nervously. Jonathan shrugged.

"You think the labs have something to do with whatever is going to happen again?" he speculated. "I thought they had closed all the activities after the '84 disaster."

This time, Nancy was the one who scoffed.

"You telling me you trust in the government's word?"

"Hell to the no," Jonathan replied in a heartbeat. They were too beaten and bruised to trust in any fancy suit saying they'd fix everything.

Lesson learned: the government is pretty good at breaking stuff and they can't fix shit. Hide, maybe. Fix? Hah, not a chance.

"I'll check around Steve's house," Nancy decided. "You take the labs' fence, okay?" Jonathan nodded. "Stay on channel five."

They synchronized the supercoms that where in Jon's backpack – him

with Will's, her with Mike's – and each went in slightly different directions. Nancy loved and hated those woods for the same reason. It had been there that she'd seen the Demogorgon, there where it had taken Barb, but it was also there that she'd learned she could be strong and determined, and not just in a bookworm kind of way as she'd been her whole life, but in a badass monster huntress way.

She walked slowly, looking in every direction she could without losing track of the map and the compass, the static of the com filling the ambience. She didn't know what she was looking for but she searched anyway, circling the backyard of Steve's house. His family had gone to Florida to stay with him even if he didn't want them to.

From where she was, she could see the pool they emptied because of the trip, and that Mike had gotten instructions on how to fill it again for Lexi Solaris' *quinceañera*, as she was calling it. That was something else that happened thanks to the Demogorgon three years ago: Steve would never go behind his parents' backs and let someone else throw a party in their house, but ever since that fall, he'd learned more about being his own man.

A noise caught Nancy's attention and she looked back, hoping to spot what it was, but seeing nothing or no one.

"Jonathan?" she called. She turned around slowly.

It looked like the sky had gone black all of a sudden, and she looked up. It had, indeed, as heavy clouds covered the sun. There was a storm coming, as summer requested.

"*Did you find anything?*" Jonathan's voice came through the com, and Nancy took it from her belt, where it was hanging.

"Nothing yet, over," she replied. "Jon…"

"*I know, the storm*," he said, reading her mind. "*We better hurry up, over*."

"Meet me in the back of Steve's house, okay? I know where the extra keys are. Over."

Well, as a matter of fact, so did Jonathan, but sometimes she'd forget

that. A drop fell on Nancy's forehead, heavy and cold. Damn Canadian weather making a visit.

She sighed and turned back to the house wondering if this was the spot where Jon took all those photos once. It had the right view of Steve's room and the pool where Barb-

Wide eyed, Nancy stepped back startled, tripping on a twig and falling on her ass. That couldn't be. She shook her head and got on her knees to look at the pool again. There wasn't anyone there, but she could *swear* she had seen someone standing by it, looking down. Not the Demogorgon, not the gardener, but-

No, that was impossible. Barb was *gone*. She was gone ages ago, El confirmed it. So long ago that her family even moved out to Nevada, away from the memories and the friend that had driven their only daughter away.

"Nance?" Jonathan called showing up a few feet behind her. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she answered quickly, getting up, eyes still on the place she could swear- "I just… tripped."

Jonathan hurried to her side.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, and she frowned and checked herself. She was wearing shorts because it was a warm day, but she hadn't hit the ground so hard to hurt herself. There was some red sort of slime on the back of her right thigh and it looked like blood, but it wasn't.

Nancy put all the things she was holding in her bag and touched the slime sensing the wave of *déjà vu* come over her and knot her stomach. She looked up at Jonathan and down to the ground, where there was a trail of slime that ran thinner towards the house.

"That's not blood," she said, though Jonathan already had figured out. The rain was starting for real, and they knew that if they didn't follow that trail now, it'd be lost forever.

With an untold decision, they followed the trail in the opposite direction of the house, through trees and bushes, hoping to God not

to meet any supernatural D&D ultra dangerous creature, because all they had with them was a pair of pistols, a box of matches that wouldn't work under the rain and no superpowered kid that could solve the rest of the problem.

Instead, all they were finding was pieces of the red slimed thing in big chunks, as if it had been covering something - or someone, judging from the bits that looked like a face or a hand.

"Have you ever seen a butterfly being born?" Jonathan asked as they got closer to more and more of those things. Nancy nodded and swallowed.

"Or a snake changing skin," she said. Lightning hit the ground not so far from them, they could feel the tremor. The water started to wash everything heavily.

"No, not like that, I think," he said. He was walking a little ahead of her, Nancy trying her best to picture as much of that mess as possible before it'd be gone forever. Jonathan stopped after a set of bushes and he was looking down frowning. She joined him and immediately understood what got him so concerned. "Doesn't it look like a cocoon to you?"

On the ground in front of them, there was a huge thing that she could only call cocoon as well. It was easily the size of a person, and it was broken open, with a dry cord that she would call umbilical cord, if she dared, hanging from its opening. Whatever was inside, it was like it'd crawled back to life.

"You think that's what Terry was talking about?" Jonathan wondered. Nancy shook her head, thinking. They were both soaked wet by now.

"I don't know. But I have a bad feeling about that."

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a/n: quick headcanon of the Henderson brothers: 5 boys with ages 15 to 32. From eldest to youngest, Stuart, Newman, Femke, Grant and Dustin. k bye

PS: be honest with me about the chapter in a review pls

4. what a throwback

Author's note: Look what Santa brought late! Well, I did say it would come ~after~ Christmas, didn't I? And this is one long chapter, brace yourselves.

Guys, happy new year! 2017 has got to be better, pls, I'm begging. There's nothing better than to end 2016 enjoying one of the only 2 good things that happened this year, right? Some *Stranger Things* material. (the other one, imo, was Rio's Olympics)

Hope you like the chapter! There's an extra note at the end. xx

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3. what a throwback

July, 1986

Nancy Wheeler

"Leslie's Beauty Parlor, good morning," Nancy said after she finally picked up the phone. Ever since they found that cocoon a week ago, she'd been beyond distracted, which was *not* good for work. Sure, to work at a hairstyling salon wasn't the ideal job for a history major, but Leslie was her mother's school friend and had been styling the Wheeler women's hair for as long as Nancy could remember, she had been kind enough to give her that job.

Lexi Solaris wanted to confirm her appointment for that afternoon. She had been calling every couple of days, because her birthday was coming up and also because apparently she was bored out of her mind. Sometimes she just called to chat. It was a bit depressing.

"*Uh… Nancy?*" she said after being confirmed that she could indeed go have her hair and nails done at 3 p.m. "*Did you talk to Ellie at all? I mean, I know Will does, but he's family, but…*"

"Yeah, I talk to her every week," Nancy answered innocently.

"*You do?*" Lexi asked. She sounded sad. Oh God, did El not call her friends? Nancy thought of a cover up fast.

"She asked me to check on her mom, it's been a bit of a crisis, you know?" she said, going with half a truth. "I give her some feedback on how she's doing and stuff." Also not a complete lie.

"*Oh…*" Lexi mumbled. Poor tiny thing.

The door of the salon opened and Jonathan came in wearing an annoyed expression behind his sunglasses. He sighed once in the safety of the air conditioning.

"Uh, Lexi, I better go," Nancy said in a hurry. "See you in a few hours, right?"

"*Yeah, see ya.*"

Nancy hung up before anyone could say anything else and smiled at Jonathan.

"That must be a record for how long you go without a jacket," Nancy joked, and Jon made a face.

"Have you gone outside?" he asked. "It's so fucking bright, it's ridiculous."

"Jonathan Byers!" Leslie exclaimed. She pointed at the little girl sitting in front of her. "Language!"

He apologized and Nancy smiled amused, especially because she knew that when there were no kids around, Leslie could swear like a sailor.

"Here," Jon said, putting something in front of Nancy. Homemade biscuits – as he liked to call them.

"Why, thank you!" she said, taking the little transparent bag. "You treat me so well!"

"Yeah, well," he shrugged.

She stopped with a biscuit midway to her mouth and sighed.

"There's a catch, isn't there?"

Jonathan smiled apologetically.

"I think it's time we tell my dad," he said and Nancy narrowed her eyes. "Hopper. We better tell Hopper."

"That makes more sense," she said. "Does the Chief know that you call him 'dad'?"

"Shut up," he replied annoyed, and she laughed. "I'm serious, we shouldn't keep it a secret."

"You already have a plan, don't you?" She asked and Jon shrugged. "What is it?"

"I told him to come here before work, so we can tell him together," he said. "Maybe see if he can get some news from the government and all."

"Do we tell him about Terry?"

"Do you think we should?"

Nancy thought about it for a moment, calmly chewing on a biscuit.

"I think we should see if he knows anything and go from there," she answered and Jonathan nodded.

"Sounds like a plan," he said, and got a biscuit from the small bag. The little girl that was having her hair done was finished and passed by them with her hair all fixed for some sort of party, her mother trailing behind her. "Isn't that the Telles girl?"

Nancy nodded. Leslie joined her behind the counter.

"Nancy, darling, go eat something," the woman said, fishing a biscuit from the bag. "We won't have any clients for the next hour anyway. Oh, these are *good*."

They really were. Nancy could never get Jonathan to tell her the recipe, though she probably wouldn't be very successful in baking those. Baking wasn't her thing at all. The two of them accepted Leslie's offer of having lunch first and went to the back, where the

kitchen was. They ate the leftovers of last night's dinner while discussing what they should and should not tell the Chief about that cocoon.

As for herself, not even Jonathan knew that Nancy thought she'd seen Barbara. It was obviously crazy, a creation of her imagination, but she didn't tell him anyway. She didn't want him to think that she was losing it, or that she was so emotionally invested that it was affecting her.

In fact, Nancy didn't want to think that she was being affected at all. She wanted to believe that she still was strong enough to get to the bottom of it and emerge almost unscathed.

It would take a while for the Chief to arrive, with him being on the night shift, but Jonathan stuck around. He'd been working as a photographer since he came back, filling his portfolio with children's parties and wedding photos not only in Hawkins but around the great area of Indianapolis. He was making a name for himself. But today, he was free. So he stayed there (and Nancy suspected it was mostly because of the AC) making sure he wouldn't get in the way, as he learned how to do from a young age.

When Hopper finally arrived, around 4 p.m., Sonja, the manicurist, already had finished with Lexi and had offered to cut Jon's nails. So the scene the Chief faced was of his stepson calmly having his nails done, wearing the perfect poker face with the sunglasses and messed hair.

"Do I even want to know?" he asked, taking off his hat and Nancy tried not to laugh. She really wished Jonathan had brought one of his cameras, so she could take a picture of the whole thing. Hopper shook his head. "What is it you have to tell me? Be quick, I don't have much time."

Nancy looked at Jon, who nodded, and she sighed as he thanked Sonja and came closer.

"We found a thing," Nancy told the Chief. He just frowned.

"What thing?"

"We don't know, but it's weird," Jonathan answered clearly nervous. "It's near Steve's house."

The Chief grew impatient. When that happened, he had a way of breathing in and looking taller, like an angry bull or something.

"*What thing?*" he insisted.

"It's easier to show than to tell," Nancy said quickly. The Chief looked at Jonathan.

"Steve Harrington's house, huh?" he asked. "What could it possibly be?"

"We really don't know," she said. "It looks like a cocoon, but it's like… human sized. And it's really beaten down, because of all the rain we've had lately, but some of it still remains. It's the same place," Nancy lowered her voice at this point. "I saw the demogorgon, you know? After Barb disappeared."

"Do you know if the Department of Energy is back doing their weird research?" Jonathan asked. Hopper shook his head.

"They never stopped, they just went somewhere else," he said. "But around here no, I don't believe they'd been doing anything here. That breech destroyed most of the compound before they could close it."

"But did they really close it?" Nancy wondered. "Or did they *say* they closed it and just left it there? I mean, El never told us how she came back."

"El came back on her own," Hopper dismissed quickly. "But you're right, I didn't go there after they said that the breech was closed. I don't want to go there ever again."

Well, that was some honest truth. None of them wanted another year like the 83-84 combo they had, most of the trouble caused by the DOE. Ask anyone involved in that mess and you could bet your ass everyone would jump at the first chance to get back to normal. Hell, that was what Billy and Max did.

"Okay, take me there," the Chief said, and Nancy looked at the clock.

"But wait, I still have half an hour of work left!" she said. Hopper checked his watch.

"Hm, you catch up with us there, then," he said. "Come on, Jonathan."

Nancy's jaw dropped and she turned to Jon, desperate for some back up that came right away.

"Hop, come on, Nancy knows more about that thing than any of us," he reasoned, making Hopper frown.

"Does she?"

She shrugged.

"Biology minor, history major, with emphasis in archeology," she said.

"What does that have to do with any human monster?"

"I don't know," Nancy pouted, innocent eyes looking up at him. The puppy face always worked for Ellie, maybe she would have some luck. "But I've been looking into some stuff that is pretty eerie and very similar to the supernatural wave we had here two years ago."

"You telling me you have field knowledge?" the Chief exclaimed impressed. "From college."

Nancy nodded. Hopper checked his watch again.

"Okay, I'll go to the station really quick, just to check to see if everything is in order, and then I'll get back here and you guys take me to that place. Understand?"

The couple nodded, and then watched Hopper leave, hat protecting from the sun that still was graciously scorching everything outside. Jonathan turned to Nancy.

"Are you really studying all that?" he asked, and Nancy nodded.

"More, even. I have some theories, but I'm still gathering info. Did you know that there's been over twenty versequakes in the past

decade just in the Maine area?"

"Versequake?" Jonathan echoed, clearly confused.

"Yep," Nancy said excitedly opening a drawer and getting a beat up notebook from it. She opened it and there was a map of Maine glued to the back cover. "It's like when the universes are shaken, you know? The way Mr. Clark explained to the boys about inter-dimensional gates. Those quakes are in such small scale that we don't even feel, but much like what El did combined with the demogorgon, it can open fissures."

"That sounds... not good," he said and Nancy nodded, though she looked over excited about all of that.

"It's totally dangerous. Those fissures can tear open a little more each time a versequake happen."

"And that's good to know because..." he pressed. Nancy closed the notebook.

"Think about it, Jon. If a state like Maine that has nothing but a few ley lines filled with tiny holes to the other world, imagine what's going on in *here*, a ley line axis where there already was at least four actual breaches in different sizes!"

Okay, now that she said it out loud, she did see how scary that sounded, and being so, her smile vanished.

"Oh, shit, we're gonna face something big, aren't we?" she said, finally looking at Jonathan with something closer to fear since they started meeting Terry Ives. Lexi passed by them and Nancy had to focus on her paying the bill.

"Are you guys coming to my birthday this weekend?" she asked.

"Oh, we're invited?" Jonathan exclaimed; they thought they'd only be on standby in case something went wrong, but apparently not. She nodded smiling. "Yeah, we'll be there."

"Yay! Cool!" she said excitedly. "I need more cool people around," she confessed leaning closer to Nancy, who smiled. "I guess I'll see you all

there, then."

They watched her go and tried not to laugh, and for the first time Jonathan took off his glasses as he turned to Nancy with raised eyebrows.

"I'm one of the cool people now?"

She shook her head.

"Jon, come on. You're *Will's brother*, she's his… girlfriend? Sort of. She wants to be on your good side."

"Oh, she'll always be on my good side," he replied, taking Nancy's notebook again to take a better look at it. "Have you seen her muscles?"

"She's got them because of her super athletic gymnast and cheerleading training, not because she's a fighter," Nancy explained. Jon looked up at her again.

"You seem to know a lot about Lexi Solaris."

Nancy sighed, sitting down in her chair.

"We've been talking a lot," she vaguely pointed at the phone on the counter and Jon raised an eyebrow again. "Speaking of, do you know if El has been calling the other boys too?"

"No," Jonathan answered.

"Don't know or she's not calling?"

"She's not calling," he said simply, flipping through the pages with growing interest.

"And that includes Lexi?"

"What do you think?"

Nancy looked out the exit Lexi had just walked through and frowned.

"I thought they were friends."

"They are," Jonathan said. "But El is not much of a talker, if you hadn't noticed."

"She talks more," she argued.

Jonathan put the notebook down.

"Nance, how long did you manage to have El engaged in Girl Talk?" he asked, and she had a hard time gathering the info in her head. "Remember what Mike told you about El's reasons for 'distractions'?"

Nancy paused.

"Oh," she said, finally getting it. "Okay, got it. But she has to call anyway, the girl misses her."

"She'll call on her birthday," he said. "I know she will."

There was one more client left, but Leslie let Nancy go when the Chief came back almost half an hour later. They go in Jonathan's car, but avoid taking the shortcut through Mirkwood, because just prospect of that *thing* gives them enough creeps.

By now, the rain and heat already caused some pretty big damage to the cocoon, but they had found something to cover it; sure it could either accelerate the thing's deterioration or give it a little longer life span, but they were willing to give it a try. When the three of them got there, the sun wasn't so high anymore, but still giving no signs of setting. The odd angle actually made that afternoon less miserable, at least in the middle of the woods, and maybe it wouldn't rain for a change. That was what the striking blue sky indicated, anyway.

They couldn't say the cocoon was fine when they took the cover out, though. For a starter, the smell was awful. There were moths everywhere, indicating that it was indeed a once-living-now-totally-dead-thing. And it was definitely different from an insect-like thing, because butterflies cocoons were very different from this.

"What the fuck…" Hopper mumbled fanning away the moths with his hat as he walked around the cocoon. "Well, isn't it disturbing?"

"We found some parts that look like a mold," Nancy said, a hand

covering her nose and mouth. "Like a body mold. And that *string*… is like an umbilical cord, we think."

"That makes it so much less disturbing, Wheeler, thank you so much," the Chief joked, though he didn't sound the least bit humorous. "Where are they?"

"Gone," Jonathan said, also covering his mouth and nose, but with his shirt. "It survived the first storm, but not the others. Or maybe some coyote got it or something. I took some photos, though," he added quickly, before Hopper could get mad for them bringing him all the way here with nothing but dead meat to show him.

"Where are they? I'd like to take a look."

"You would?" Jonathan said surprised, shaking his head. Hopper looked at him stunned. "Uh, they're back at the house. We can go there and get them."

Hop didn't say anything, he just started walking in the direction of their house. Jonathan and Nancy exchanged a look, but before they could say anything, they heard a call.

"*Aren't you coming?*" shouted the Chief, and it got them moving.

Jonathan sped ahead of them with the excuse of making the best of their time, but Nancy knew that it was because he didn't want the Chief to know where he kept his pictures about the supernatural. He had almost three boxes of things since Will disappeared in 1983, and they were all hidden in his room. When Nancy and the Chief got to the house, Jon was standing on the front porch with empty hands.

"I can't go get my things," he said as a matter of apology when they got closer.

"Why not?" asked Hopper.

"They're in my room and there's a sock on the door," he answered plainly.

"*A what?*" exclaimed Nancy.

"A sock," Jon repeated. "On the door handle. And noise. Also the door is locked."

After a moment of pure shock, Hopper shook his head.

"*Who?*" he asked with wide eyes. Nancy had a good guess.

"Didn't you see the car?" she said pointing behind her. Hopper looked back, taking notice of the black Camaro parked in front of his house. "Plaque from Vermont. What do you think?"

"The Sinclair girl? He actually got the Sinclair girl?" the Chief said impressed.

"Don't act so surprised, we all saw it coming," Jon shrugged. "I just didn't expect for it to happen *today*. But well."

"Well?" Hopper said. "Now we have to wait for the end of a teenager affair to get on with this *thing* you've been researching? I'm going back to the station to make some calls."

"We're going with you," Nancy offered de pronto, but Hopper stopped her.

"No, you won't," he said firmly. "You come when you have those photos, but until then, lemme do my work."

"But Hop!" Jonathan started, but one glare from the Chief made him stop.

"I said, *lemme handle it*. Got it?"

Jonathan sighed and then nodded. Hopper made two steps away from the house, and then came back, taking Jon by the shoulder.

"You're my ride," he said. "Now, let's go."

"He totally dad-ed you," Nancy whispered to Jonathan as soon as Hop let go of him and he rolled his eyes.

"He got worse after Callie was born," he confessed in a low voice, and then asked normally. "Where is my mom, by the way?"

Hopper looked back at them.

"She's with *her* mom," he pointed at Nancy. "As usual."

They drove mostly in silence, Nancy in the back seat going through her notebook, trying to see if there was anything that could help her. For the past almost two years, she'd been trying to gather information about dark universes and telekinetic people, but nothing anywhere said anything about humans incubated in cocoons.

The car stopped in front of the police station and Hopper hopped out, Nancy crawled to the front seat. The sky was darkening.

"Thanks, Jonny," the Chief said leaning over and looking through Nancy's window. "It was good to tell me."

"No problem," Jonathan said nodding and she smiled. As soon as he crossed the sidewalk and entered in the station, Nancy turned to Jon.

"It wasn't a good idea to tell him, was it?"

"Not at all," Jonathan replied turning the engine on; he looked a little annoyed, probably because the idea had been his, so Nancy had to think of something that would cheer him up.

"Hey, my mom said she'd be making pork chops tonight for dinner, wanna come over?" she invited and he smiled. He wasn't wearing the sunglasses anymore. "And maybe, tomorrow we can go to Indianapolis to talk to Terry again, what do you think?"

It was a plan that he pretty much enjoyed and being so, they were happy to put it in practice – first with family dinner, and then with the following day's schedule. However, all changed with a call.

"What is it you look at so much?" Nancy asked Mike after dinner when they were all in the TV room. It wasn't the first time that week that she saw him staring at the inside of a small box. As soon as she spoke, he closed the box.

"Nothing," he answered way too quickly, but before she could grill him more, the telephone rung and he picked it up. "Hello?"

For a moment, there was silence, and Mike looked up at Nancy who was standing near him. And then-

"Hi El," he said, finally breathing. "Yeah, I'm fine. Chilling," Nancy noticed how his fingers traced the little box as he spoke and she frowned. "What about you? Yeah? Nice. She's right here, hold on."

He passed the phone to Nancy, who picked it fast, eager to talk to El.

"Hey, are you psychic or something?" she said as way of greeting, and was met by silence on the other side of the line.

"*Yeah, I am,*" El answered, clearly confused by that conversation start. "*You know that.*"

"It's a joke, Ellie," Nancy explained. "Because I was just thinking about you and you called."

"*Oh,*" the other girl muttered and Nancy shook her head.

"How are things going?" she asked instead of going right to the subject.

"*Hard,*" El answered sincerely. "*But I'm catching up. I might even be in the starting lineup of the final game.*"

"That's neat, El!" Nancy exclaimed, and then turned to Mike. "She's doing great."

"She knows you're diverting," he said, and she frowned.

"How do you know she knows?" she challenged and he shrugged, turning to the TV.

"I know her," Mike answered, which was some truth.

"*You wanted to talk to me about more than just hockey,*" El said on the phone. Nancy sighed.

"Yeah, I do," she admitted. "Jon and I, we told your dad today. About the thing."

On her side of the line, El just breathed.

"*Not a very good idea, I suppose?*" she guessed.

"Yep. I mean, now he wants to do everything alone."

El sighed.

"*When will Hop ever get it we work better together?*" she wondered and Nancy scoffed.

"What?" she provoked. "Ellie, you're the queen of 'I work alone', might as well change your name to Bruce Wayne."

"*That's bullshit!*" El protested. On the sofa, Mike made a face.

"She's more of an Arthur Curry person," he said. "Likes him better too."

"You like *Aquaman*?" Nancy practically shouted; she was frowning. Mike's face indicated that she'd asked the wrong question.

"*What is there not to like, Nance?*" El asked, and the coldness of her voice made Nancy rethink her life choices.

"Anyway!" she began again. "We were thinking about visiting your mom tomorrow, to see if we can find something else from her this time."

"*No need,*" El said. It took a couple of seconds for Nancy to process it, and she shook her head.

"No?"

"*No,*" El replied. "*You will find out more soon, just hold on a little longer.*"

"How do you even *know* that?" Nancy marveled. She was sure El shrugged all the way from Illinois. "We have to go talk to Terry anyway, she clearly knows what this thing is."

"*No, leave her for now,*" El insisted. "*I will handle her when I come back.*

And as for the monster, there are other ways of finding out what it is."

"Is there?" Nancy asked and El hummed on the other side of the line. "Care to elaborate?"

"*You know how, Nance,*" El replied vaguely. "*There are other ways and you know that.*"

"Do I?" Nancy wondered.

"*I gotta go,*" El cut. Nancy could only feel confusion. "*I will call again after Lexi's party.*"

"Okay," Nancy mumbled, and then it hit her. "Speaking of!"

"*I know*," El said. "*But I'll only call on her birthday. I can hardly handle Lexi and her shenanigans on a normal day. I won't be able to do that* now."

"Your ability to say no amazes me," Nancy said solemnly.

"*I know.*"

It wasn't even El being rude, it was just that she had her own way of engaging in conversations that was a little unconventional. She was a good faker, but with people she knew she didn't need to fake, that girl was as sharp and precise as a chef's knife.

"*I really should go,*" El said more firmly. "*We'll talk soon.*"

Before Nancy could say goodbye, El hung up. Maybe payback for hanging up on Lexi earlier that day. Anyway. Now that her plans for the next day were dead, she'd have to figure out what exactly was it that she could do to find out which monster was coming their way.

"So you told the Chief about the thing you found near Steve's house?" Mike said innocently, eyes on the TV, and Nancy turned to him, mouth ajar and lacking words. "Yeah, I know. So much for not keeping secrets, right big sis?"

"Mike," she started, and he sighed. The box was firm in his palm.

"Never mind, Nancy," he said and she frowned. Mike hardly ever backed out of a fight. "There's nothing we can do with Hopper in the boat anyway."

Mike got up and left; Nancy occupied his place on the sofa. Her mom came from upstairs after putting Holly to bed and joined her. He had a point, Mike. Unless something else happened to turn them in the right direction, there was nothing they could do.

Karen put a gentle hand on Nancy's knee and she looked up at her mother.

"Wanna watch *Singin' In The Rain* with me, sweetie?" she offered.

Growing up, that had been Nancy and Karen's favorite movie, and they knew it by heart. Lately, they'd only watch it together on Thanksgiving, and Nancy was ready to say no, go to bed like Mike did, but instead she thought better and smiled.

"Only if we can have some cake with it," she said, and Karen's smile grew.

"Not only cake, but a side of ice cream, what do you think?"

"I think," Nancy said. "That that's a genius idea, mom. I will get the movie."

"And I will get the cake."

The next day, Nancy took Holly downtown, since she wouldn't have to go to another city, willing to spend some time with her baby sister at the movies, and Jonathan joined them. She still wanted to watch *Labyrinth*, so that was what they chose. As they left the movie theater, the three of them with fresh sacks of popcorn, eagerly talking about the ending, they almost didn't see who was passing by them, only noticing after being greeted.

"Ah, the Wheeler girls looking lovely as always," the man said as he walked by, making Nancy, Holly and Jon stop and turn around. He tipped his hat so they could see his face.

"Dale?" Nancy marveled. She hadn't seen him in *ages*. He was friends

with her mom, and one of the owners of the movie theater. Dale flashed them a smile. "Wow, nice to have you around!"

He shrugged.

"Feels good to be back," he said.

"I bet," she agreed. "Did you meet my mom yet? She'll be so thrilled."

"I haven't," Dale said. "But you know what? You girls come back here this week, watch a movie on the house."

"Really?" Nancy exclaimed.

"Any movie?" Holly asked excited. "Can we watch the new *Star Trek*?"

Nancy laughed and patted Holly's hair.

"It wasn't released yet, Fozzie," she said.

"But he owns the movie," Holly argued. "He has got to have it."

"Unfortunately, not yet, little Hol," Dale said, kneeling down in front of her. "But if you want to watch something that was released the past couple of months with your mommy, then you come."

"Okay," Holly agreed a little defeated, making Nancy and Jon laugh.

"I gotta go," Dale said getting up, but he was looking past them. "You know, I have a lot of catching up to do. Tell Karen I said hello," he added, now looking at Nancy. Something seemed off about him, but she couldn't place what.

"Will do," she replied and he quickly walked towards Hawkins' only movie theater, where once Tommy B. painted lies about her.

They made three steps in the opposite direction when Will practically collided into them.

"Did you see him?" he asked wide eyed and out of breath.

"Who?" replied Jonathan, holding Will by his shoulders with concern. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

Will hardly nodded, eyes diverging to the movies all the time.

"Dale, did you see him?"

"Yeah, we just talked to him. Why?" Nancy asked. Will looked at her as if she was stupid.

"You thought that was super normal?" he wondered, eyes going from Jonathan to Nancy and back again. "He's been gone for three years!"

"Yeah, it's good to have him back," Nancy said excitedly. Whenever she came with her mom and he was there, he'd give them a discount.

Will stepped back flabbergasted.

"Are you seriously this simple?" he asked. Rhetorically. "Guys, he's Dale Hale. He was taken by the demogorgon three years ago. He was dead."

Nancy frowned.

"*Dead* dead?" asked Holly and Will looked at her and nodded gravelly. "*Wow!*"

"No, it can't be, he's right here," Nancy said confused.

"Yes, it can be!" Will protested. "I saw him! Mom saw him, so did Hop. When they went to rescue me, we saw his body and he was way past saving. And now he's walking among us again, in flesh and bone." He breathed, hands on his hips, staring at the movie theater. "*How?*"

"Did you see him before?" Jon asked. "I mean, before today?"

He looked concerned, as if something had just clicked, and Will nodded.

"At the store a few weeks ago," he answered. Will's voice was a mix of fear and confusion.

Nancy and Jonathan exchanged a look. That sounded like a brand new path to take, especially thinking about the vision she had the

other day. If Dale was here, someone taken by the demogorgon, maybe she hadn't imagined Barbara either.

"Will, go back to work, okay?" Jonathan requested, making his brother look at him. "We'll see if we find something out and we'll tell you later."

"Okay," Will said reluctantly, still looking more at the building than to anyone else. He shrugged it off. "This crazy ass town," he mumbled.

Nancy was under the impression that he might know more than he was letting show, just like Jon, but she would leave that for Jonathan to find out. It was *his* family, after all, and he had a bit of a hard time allowing her in, even after all these years.

Will went back down the avenue, and Nancy, Jon and Holly continued towards her house.

"You have any idea what might be going on?" he asked. "Did you see anything like that in your research?"

Nancy pouted and shook her head. She never even considered that "coming back from the dead" could be a supernatural factor. Well, religiously speaking, certainly, but from a Vale of Shadows point of view? Not at all. It didn't even occur to her. Maybe now she'd have to add that to her list of occurrences.

"I think I will have to change the angle of my research if Will is right."

"He's right," Jonathan assured. "I trust him."

Nancy wasn't so sure he should. Will had been unstable ever since he was rescued, and she still wasn't sure if his family didn't *see* it or didn't *want* to see it. After he saved Max from the demon, he got better, but he still gave her the creeps sometimes.

"Why don't you go home with Holly?" Jon offered. "I have to buy some things for my mom anyway. I might as well do it now. And then, after thinking alone, we can run theories."

Nancy nodded. All the heat and the suspicion were tiring her brain way too quickly, and she knew for a fact that Hol didn't want to miss her afternoon cartoons.

"I'll call you," she said and Jon nodded.

Holly said goodbye to Jonathan and the two sisters went back home at a fast pace. As she suspected, Holly's TV show was about to start and she didn't want to miss it.

By the time Nancy had a shower and helped her mom start preparing dinner, her father and Mike came back from work and if there was something she had to do it was to have a chat with Mike. So Nancy went back to her room, where she kept her notebook and a folder filled with articles and magazines that talked about the same thing even if just barely, and then knocked on her brother's door.

"Are you busy?" she asked, noticing that Mike had several books opened on his writing desk. He was writing in one of the Moleskins El had given to him, but looked up at her.

"Researching," Mike answered, leaving the book on the desk to pay attention on her.

"Is that D&D?" she pointed curiously, and he nodded. Nancy dropped her things on his desk and got the first book that was in front of her. It was the Master's monster guide.

"Yeah, I'm writing a new campaign," Mike told her, watching her walk to his bed and lay down on it. "It's been a while since we played, and we're planning on playing when El gets back."

Nancy frowned as she turned the pages.

"Never pegged El as a D&D person," she commented and Mike chuckled.

"She isn't," he said. "Never had the patience, but it was her idea."

"Really?" asked Nancy, dropping the book on her chest to look at Mike, who nodded. "Interesting."

"I've been thinking about a new campaign for a while now, so I'm just writing that."

Nancy was frowning. If she had learned something the past year and a half that El's been around was that the girl never did anything for nothing. She always had an agenda. So if El wanted to play with the boys…

Mike took Nancy's folder from the top of his things and opened it, dared to peek inside. She nodded, so he continued.

"*Oh,*" he mumbled, probably because he saw the symbol of her college on the top of one of the articles. "I thought you'd tell me about the weird thing in the woods, but apparently you're telling me why you chose Maine."

"It's all connected, really," she admitted, looking for a more comfortable position on the bed.

Mike's new bed was huge because he's gotten super tall, which came as a surprise. That was all on their mom's side again, and he was such a clumsy duckling now, it was funny. The only time he looked somewhat graceful was when he was writing or playing the guitar. Have Mike moving and you had a walking disaster.

"How do you even know about it?" Nancy asked. Mike shrugged.

"Lexi heard you and Jon talking to Hopper, so she told Dustin, who told Lucas who told me, so I called Will and we all went there, but Hop was there already with some DOE people removing the cocoon from its place."

Nancy sat up taken by surprise.

"The DOE took the thing?" she exclaimed. Mike nodded. "Fuck!"

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Will said not to worry, though, that there will be more."

"He said that?"

"With those exact words."

"Weird," Nancy said laying down again in a different angle just to sit up again, because there was a lump near the pillow.

Frowning, she turned around to see what it was and found the box Mike was holding the previous night. She let curiosity have the best of her and opened the box finding inside the most delicate of rings, a silver band with four light pink stones carved in it that made her jaw drop.

"Mike!" she breathed, and he looked up at her. It took him a moment to see what she was holding, and when he did, he blushed a little. "What *is* this?"

"A ring," he replied trying to dismiss it, but she gave him her best big sister glare and he just opened up. "It's for El. I was going to give it to her during Christmas, and then for the New Year and then Valentine's day, until it was too late."

"It's not too late for her birthday!" she exclaimed and he shook his head.

"Yes, it is," Mike assured. Nancy frowned again.

"It's not," she insisted getting up. "I'm sure El won't mind if it arrives a few days late. I'm sure she'll like to know that you thought about her."

"Yeah, but we're not together anymore," he said as a way of excuse. Nancy scoffed.

"I can't believe you became such a chicken after you two got serious," she provoked, walking to him. "Is that why you were carrying it around the whole week? Because you were waiting for another perfect opportunity to pass? Where's the brave kid who found out how to kill a demon a couple of years ago?" She put the ring on the table right in front of him. "I don't care if you're not together anymore, friends give presents to one another. Send it to her, Mike."

That was an unexpected rant. And at the end of the day, she didn't even do what she had gone there to do. Mike took the ring from the table; Nancy didn't know the story behind it, but she could only guess

that he spent most of his money on it, it was a really nice ring. El should have it.

"Displacer," Mike said. Nancy didn't understand anything. "It was a displacer, not a demon."

"But you guys always called it a demon," she said, caught off guard.

"Because Max called it that and we got tired of correcting her. It *is* sort of like a demon, and that's an easier name to use. But it was a displacer that we defeated."

"Thanks to you," she said, a hand on his shoulder. Mike looked at her and Nancy smiled. "Send it, little brother."

He sighed and she was about to leave, but instead of going empty-handed, she got the monster guide from his bed, left her erratic research with him, at least for this night. Mike needed to think alone, and coming to think about it, the boys were always able to find clues in D&D, so maybe… she could try too.

[...]

Mike Wheeler

Ted Wheeler's personal assistant – that was what Mike had been hired to do. Ted Wheeler was an architect, but not the cool type of architect, who would go around and help design houses and buildings. No, he was the type to stay in an accountant office doing all the math work no one else wanted to do. A consultant, of sorts. It was one boring life that offered his family an easy life, so Mike guessed that it felt like enough for his dad.

Being Ted's assistant meant that Mike had his own desk – but just because it was inside his father's office – a noisy computer and his own pile of math work to do. It was the price to pay when you were good with numbers, he supposed. Had he been pretty like his sisters, maybe he'd have Spencer's job right now, like Nancy had a couple of years ago.

The good part was that the work didn't take much of his day, especially now during summer break, and Mike had some extra time

to write his campaign, like he was doing that afternoon. He knew he *should* be reading the things Nance had lent him the night before, but all the ideas were in full speed in his head and he just *had* to write, especially when his dad was out of sight in some reunion the way he was at the moment.

"That's got to be some intense work," someone said to him, and Mike looked up to see Spencer standing in front of his desk.

When the days were slow like today, she'd come to hang out for a while, or he'd go stay with her behind the front desk playing cards. He always lost. Her hands were *light*.

"No, I'm actually…" he mumbled sitting straighter. Mike blushed a little. "It's D&D," he admitted, and Spencer raised an eyebrow.

"Dungeons and Dragons?" she asked and he nodded. "How nerdy."

"I know."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"I'm writing a campaign for our next game," he told her. "I have… twenty-eight days to prepare."

"That's precise," Spencer admired sitting on his desk.

"Yeah, we're waiting for a friend to come back from camp, which will be in twenty-seven days, and then we'll give her a free day before she faces a ten hour campaign."

"*Ten hours?*" Spencer exclaimed impressed. Mike shrugged.

"We usually have epic games, and this one has got to be the biggest of them all."

"How so?"

"Well, for starters, we haven't played in months, so we all kinda need it right now. And then there's the fact that El actually wants to play this time, which makes it a special occasion, and being a special occasion –" Mike stopped, noticing that he was babbling like he

always did when he talked about things he enjoyed. He leaned back in his chair and looked at Spencer, who was waiting for him to continue. He shook his head. "Sorry, I'm boring you again."

"No, you're not!" she exclaimed, touching his hand gently. "You're not," Spencer assured.

Mike looked from her hand on his and up to her face. Spencer looked like a supermodel with the infinite legs, the long blonde hair, the delicate features and brown eyes. She also was the big boss's daughter and she was a year older than him.

And she didn't let go of his hand.

"Tell me about the campaign," she said. "What's special about it?"

Mike smiled. It looked like she really wanted to know, so he'd just tell her.

"Well, it's a bit of a throwback to a campaign I wrote a few years ago, a polemic one. The guys kept saying that it was full of plot holes and that it didn't make sense, so I decided to bring it back with a new twist to it, like a reboot."

"Uh, interesting," she said smiling. Mike shook his head.

"It really isn't, but-"

They were interrupted by the sound of the front door being loudly opened, and then by a familiar voice. Spencer stood up.

"Where is the pretty receptionist?"

It was Will, as it was confirmed when he passed by the reception to get to the offices. *Ted's* office, which was one of the firsts, with its glass windows. He was carrying a disc with both hands and his face lit up when he saw Mike.

"Wheeler!" Will exclaimed, coming faster. "Have you ever listened to Poison? I've been meaning to for *weeks*, just never got around to it, but now I did and," he stopped, finally noticing Spencer standing by his side. "Receptionist girl, you are so very tall."

She was tall. Supermodel tall. Not enough to be taller than Mike or Lucas, but definitely taller than Will. And apparently, by the color of her cheeks, super aware.

"Thanks?"

Will nodded. It was a compliment after all.

"I didn't," answered Mike. "Listen to Poison, I mean. I haven't yet."

"Oh, Mike," Will said turning to him wide-eyed. "It's like… Bon Jovi and David Bowie had a kid and that kid decided to go to the dark side of the force, but, like, as a joke? It's flamboyant and rock 'n roll and kinda stupid but also genius, you gotta listen to this."

He said all that pointing to a colorful album cover that Mike supposed could be considered flamboyant, indeed, and he left it on the table.

"This one is for you."

"How thoughtful!" Mike joked. "My birthday is in six months, Byers!"

"Just listen to it, you'll get it," Will insisted. He was peeking at Mike's scattered papers and one of them caught his attention. He got it to take a better look. "Is that El's new character for the campaign?"

"Yes," Mike answered focusing hard not to blush. "I recall you said she said that she wanted me to write her one."

Will smiled at the paper.

"The brave princess? Seriously?"

"She likes princesses," Mike defended his choice. "And that's no ordinary princess anyway."

"Oh, yeah, telekinetic powers, how original."

"She'll understand," Mike said snatching the paper from Will's hand. He was shaking his head.

"You know she'll bail in the first hour, right?"

"Quite optimistic," Mike nodded. He turned to Spencer. "She gets easily bored. She was always like, *but Mike, I'll hang on strong this time!*"

Will laughed.

"And then we'd make the first couple of moves and she was just so done," he added. "It's not even that she doesn't think it's interesting, she loves stories. She's obsessed with books and movies."

"Like, she was reading the Russians just for kicks," Mike told Spencer.

"But there are some things she just can't bring herself to care," Will continued. He turned to Mike again. "Should just give her her old character."

"No, she has to have this one," Mike insisted.

"Do you even have a reason for this?"

"*Do I…?* Of course I do!" Mike protested offended. "When do I ever do something without an agenda?"

Will raised an eyebrow.

"Do you want me to make a list?"

Mike rolled his eyes.

"Shouldn't you be working right now, Byers?"

"It's my lunch break," he said.

"Well, enjoy your half hour somewhere else!"

Will looked at his watch and then sighed shaking his head.

"There's no enjoyment in this life," he complained. "I better be going, Lexi is there driving Solomon crazy. Actually, there *is* enjoyment in this life. Gotta go!"

He was walking out of the office as he spoke, and still managed to look cool doing it. Mike supposed some people just were born with it.

"Listen to the album!" Will added. "Bye, pretty lady I still don't know the name of."

Which was a lie, he knew exactly who she was, but Spencer wasn't aware of that. Will winked at Spencer and she laughed. They watched him leave as loudly and abruptly as he came in and Mike shook his head.

"That…" Spencer started still laughing. "Was a hurricane."

"Yep," Mike agreed. "That's teenage Will for you. Way too much coffee and maybe a tad high, also, he has a troubled past, but we know that deep down he's a nice person."

"Deep down?"

Mike shook his head.

"Nah, he's really cool. Despite, you know, everything. It's good to have him still here."

It occurred to him that Spencer wouldn't have much to add on that matter. Only recently had she started to come to Hawkins, she had no business but business around here, and he had no reason to bring up such matters. Luckily, she was good at keeping conversations going.

"So your throwback campaign has to have a brave princess?" she said, bringing the paper Will had picked up before closer to her. Mike smiled.

"It has to. She wasn't always inspired on El, though, I had to adapt for her. But she was a key character before and she's now more than ever, with a player behind her."

The front door opened again and someone leaned on the reception desk, interrupting Mike and Spencer's chat. She was being summoned, and she'd better go there before someone summoned her father.

Spencer looked at Mike apologetically, and he just nodded. They'd have plenty of time to talk later, they always did. Also, he wanted to keep on writing and she interrupted his flow.

She walked back to the reception and he sighed. On his table, his dad let him have pics with Nancy and Holly, and with his friends. The one with El was there from before the breakup and he never hid it or took it back home.

The brave princess. She had some business to take care of. And he had twenty-eight days to deliver it in a convincing way.

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a/n: I found that many people like that kind of thing, so I'll give you guys some BODY references, because I already was asked who I imagined when I wrote. First of all, as a writer, I usually do this thing where, like, I know Finn is Mike and Caleb is Lucas, but I don't SEE them as the characters, you know? It's like I create my own version in my head of *how* they are physically.

Sometimes, though, I do think of people as reference to my characters and I'll tell you what I have in mind when I write this fic, I'll repeat, as BODY REFERENCE, not PEOPLE reference. So starting with my OC **Lexi Solaris**, yall know her by now, the teeny Latina is more or less like Jade Barbosa (IG: jade_barbosa), who's also a teeny gymnast from Brazil's NT. Only that Lexi has green eyes. Another OC that you saw this chapter and will show up more in the future is **Spencer Hall**. She's basically a tall Billie Lourd (IG: praisethelourd). I love Billie, guys! As for **Jennifer Hayes**, she'd be like Sophie Nelisse (IG: sophie[double underline]nelisse), the book thief.

I'll also tell you about some of the protagonists. Teen **Ellie Hopper** has a body like Emily Lind's in my head (IG: emilyalind). You know Emily Lind? Finn's life long crush? The Lind sisters are so pretty it makes me sad. ANYWAY. I'll explain it better during future chapters, but **Will Byers** would be a very low-key Tom Holland (IG: tomholland2013). Like *very* low-key. As for **Mike Wheeler**, he'd be like Asa Butterfield (IG: asabopp), and **Lucas Sinclair** would be like Ian Clark (IG: iclark21), both lean and so very tall, just also very clumsy because, you know, they are teenagers.

That's it! I'll bring more to you guys in the future. Also, next chapter is on its way. Happy new year again, and may 2017 be good! x

5. all the running you can do

Author's note: It took a while, but it came. On the bright side, this chapter has +11,6k words. I'll TRY to finish the next and post before the month is over, but I can make many promises, ok?

Also, the title here... it's a tip about the Fall section of this fic, that will begin with chapter 6. Stay tuned!

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4. all the running you can do

Will Byers

August, 1986

The water was its own type of calmness and down there, he felt lulled. There was no sound but his own heartbeat, and that was a big deal. The voices had been so loud lately and so incoherent that Will couldn't make sense of them. They were giving him headaches.

The sun was up and the clear water shone with gold in the bottom. Gold, the reason he jumped in in the first place. Will wasn't the best diver in the world, but he had been getting good at this apnea thing, considering that being under water was the only thing capable of shutting the world down. Whenever the voices got too loud, or too damn noisy, he'd just… go have a bath. While El used it to tune in, he used it to tune down. In both cases, it always worked.

So he followed the gold, arms stroking to reach the bottom of the recently cleaned and filled pool, and he went deeper, deeper towards that small sparkly thing.

When Will was almost at arm's reach, he closed his eyes for just a second, just to enjoy this final moment before his feet would kick at the bottom of the pool and prop him up to surface again. And then he heard the thumping.

His eyes snapped open again, and the bottom of the pool had changed. Not completely, but just enough of a red and purple

familiar thing with its veins and its transparence to appear, and more importantly, with somewhere else's people trapped on the other side. Will saw the fist hitting the breech with wide open eyes, and some air escaped him. The fist hit it again, but he didn't have the time for that, he didn't have the time to pull someone from that hellish place.

(Part of him also feared that the person on the other side didn't want to be pulled out, but to pull him in, and that fear got the best of him. Experience calloused his kindness.)

Focused, Will reached out and got the key, the gold thing that had him stripping down to his shorts and jumping in the pool before it was allowed, just so Lexi could have the birthday party she wanted with the food she wanted. His fingers closed around the key, he rolled over and with one well calculated kick Will Byers was coming back to the surface, fist in the air to showcase the key first. With a swish, all the sounds came back at once – the music, the chatter, the wind, but Will? Will was safe and sound.

"I got it!" he exclaimed after gulping a big deal of air, and the hoard of people shouted with excitement.

"FOOD!" some started to shout, and when Will got to the border Lucas got the key from him instead of Lexi.

"I've got this, you go enjoy your party," he said to the girl who despite her best efforts, was already beginning to get stressed out. The accident with the key was just another thing to add to her lists of 'things that went wrong while the girls weren't around'.

Lexi smiled and thanked Lucas for taking care of that. Basically every single teen that stayed in Hawkins had been invited to that party, and even though, okay, Lexi *was* a cheerleader and a strong competitor to get the captain spot, everyone knew for a fact that most people were there to see the Harrington's house up close.

"Get out of the pool, Will," she demanded crossing her arms and Will smiled.

Even though the sun was high and hot on top of his head, it felt better to stay in the pool than outside it. No one else had gotten in,

because no one else was authorized yet, but if the temperatures kept rising like that, soon the pool would be crowded.

"You know I can't go out now, everyone will be staring at my hot wet body and then it will be chaos," he argued, and she made a clear effort not to laugh.

Looking up from his spot hanging on the pool's border, Will observed Lexi with a smile; he had a full view of her muscular and tanned legs and she even looked a tad tall from down there.

"Stop staring at me," Lexi said again, avoiding eye contact with him.

She was mad at him. She probably would never put the words like that, but it was a fact. Mad because he really settled down and had been spending most of the past couple of weeks with Maya Sinclair, mad because he and the boys had spent the other part of the time working and when they weren't working, they were raiding the woods looking for strange cocoons that she knew nothing about, mad because it was almost noon at her birthday and El still hadn't called her.

Will did the only reasonable thing he could at that moment to help cheer her up a little, then. Instead of getting out of the pool, he splashed water on Lexi, making her gasp in surprise. Those who were close enough to them looked over with dropped jaws.

"William Byers!" she exclaimed. She wasn't even *that* wet, just a streak of water on her white summer dress, making the fabric cling to her super defined stomach. Her bikini was navy, that he could see too.

"Come on, Lexi, come for a swim! It's harmless," he proposed and she breathed. He knew it wasn't supposed to be now, but… the sooner you make a party interesting, the better. She didn't seem very eager to give in, so Will tried a different approach, then. "Maria Alessandra, do me the honor of joining me in this incredibly amazing pool to celebrate your much anticipated *quinceañera*?"

This time, she couldn't hide the chuckle and she covered her mouth with her hand, but a second later she obliged, kicking away her flip

flops and taking off her dress. The crowd cheered and roared when she jumped in with an awesome back flip, and it only took a minute for the pool to be filled with people chatting and splashing water around.

"See?" he said, getting closer to Lexi, who was greeting all kinds of people who came to congratulate her on the birthday and the party. "I know you're stressed out with that bunch of kids you're helping train, but you gotta know sometimes all you need to do is to relax, Lexi."

She sighed.

"Why do you know me so well?" she complained and he laughed. She opened her mouth to say something else, but was interrupted again.

"Lexi, this party is *mental*!" Maya exclaimed excitedly, joining the two of them. Lexi smiled.

"Thanks!" she said sincerely.

"I'm so happy you invited me, even if it's my last day in Hawkins," Maya continued and Lexi scoffed.

"*Please*, as if I'd leave you out of this," she said slapping the other girl's shoulder playfully. "Besides, it was so long since we spent a summer together, we definitely should end it on a high note."

"Definitely," Maya agreed. They had been friends before Will got in the equation. He didn't know exactly how Lexi felt about the situation, but he also didn't think it was his place to ask her that.

"Hey, Lexi!" Dustin called from the door. "It's El on the phone!"

Lexi's face lit up and she immediately bolted to get out of the pool. She did it so gracefully and effortlessly that it was incredible. Maya sighed.

"I'll miss that tiny muffin," she said, turning to Will. From all they knew, if Lexi didn't make it to the national team, she would try for UCLA, and Maya was going to Houston, so there was a big chance of them never seeing each other again.

"Don't think about that now," Will said. His hand looked for hers underwater and she smiled.

"I won't," Maya replied. "Imma spend that time thinking about you."

Will shook his head.

"Why *think*?" he questioned. "I'm *right here*. Enjoy."

Maya laughed.

"Yeah, that's a nice thought," she admitted and got closer. Her eyes were so dark, but when he got up close like this, they were actually this deep shade of brown that was enchanting. Will's other arm went around her waist and their noses touched. "You know, Will," Maya talked again. "Under the sun you are just *so white*."

This time, it was Will's turn to laugh and she joined him. Maya's fingers traced random patterns on his shoulder. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't be," she said. "It's not a problem. It's just that you're kind of glowing and it's funny."

"Yeah, the genetic lottery wasn't very nice on me," he admitted and Maya shook her head.

"Are you kidding me?" she exclaimed, now touching his face. Her fingers were nice and cold because of the water and it felt refreshing. "Look at this face, you definitely won the genetic lottery and that's a fact."

"Ugh," Will exclaimed dramatically, a hand to his chest. "How she flatters me, I'm gonna explode!"

Maya laughed again. Her laugh could bring back fairies from Neverland. Will was going to marry this girl. He held her closer and her fingers went from his cheeks to his lips before they traced down his neck and to the back, tangling in his hair as they kissed, the breech at the bottom of the pool totally forgotten.

They made a barbecue, Jon and Nancy were in charge of the grill, Dustin and Savannah took care of the music and Mike was making sure no one went inside the house. That had been the deal with Steve – only the people he knew plus Lexi were allowed inside, in an attempt to maintain some order. It was alright. It was so hot that most people were worried about staying in the pool than anything else, including Will.

Around 2 p.m., after everyone was done with the hamburgers and hot dogs, they cut the cake and the crowd started to disperse. When Will wasn't with Maya, he just sat on the border of the pool, eyes on its bottom, wondering if the breech he had seen was just his imagination. He was so concentrated that he almost didn't hear the commotion coming from the woods.

"What must it be, now?" wondered Maya standing behind Will. He looked up at her and she handed him a piece of cake, but her eyes were looking beyond him.

Before he turned around, he already knew what it was about. Will had no idea why or how, but he just *knew*. The feelings of accomplishment and fear mixed in his head and heart.

"Why don't you go check it out?" he suggested without looking at Maya.

"Yeah, I will," she said, walking over to where the people were headed. "You're not coming?"

Will shook his head.

"I'm good," he said, though it wasn't completely true, he was feeling a little sick.

Maya shrugged and went on, then, leaving him there. The pool area was practically empty now, and he looked around to see who was left. Nearby, Mike was staring at him.

"You alright, Byers?" he asked. "You look a little green."

Will cleared his throat.

"I'm fine," he answered. "Aren't you going to go check it out?"

Mike shrugged.

"Aren't you?"

"Not in the mood," Will said and Mike nodded.

"Wanna get out of the sun?" he offered, pointing at the house behind him. "Steve told me which bottles of booze to go for without his parents noticing."

Will smiled.

"Wow Mike, rebellion looks good on you!" he joked and Mike rolled his eyes. "Okay, you go and find us something, I'll just go tell Lexi we didn't disappear on her."

Lexi, like everyone else, had gone see them. Though "*them*" wasn't the right way to describe it, for they weren't there anymore. What was found was the same thing that Will and his friends had been looking for the past days: cocoons. There were five left, and he had no idea how many were found this time, just that it was more than one. He knew that much because they were taken together. Henry and Dale, back from the dead. And a very limited number of people knew that small detail.

Of course that also brought up the mystery of who had been the first to break out. Will had a good guess, but he didn't want to jump to conclusions just yet. He took a deep breath, eyes on the noisy line of trees behind the Harrington's house and another wave of nausea hit him, this time stronger than ever.

Will stumbled to the side of the house, tripping on his own feet until he reached a hidden corner where he heaved the contents of his stomach. This nausea was less constant than the first time he had them a few years back; lately he had more headaches than anything else, but they were annoying all the same and had the same result: at least one daring slug out in the world.

He started at that bold little creature with disgust and anger as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Even back then, when he

returned from the Upside-Down, Will had found ways to kill them, and he's gotten messy lately. These… *things* just made him so *angry* that the anger took over him. His breathing quickened and the slug, that was trying to dig on the dirt of the ground, started to float just a few inches from the ground. Maybe it was his imagination, but the slug let out a high screech as it contorted and turned and the noise stopped at once when it exploded.

Exhausted, Will leaned against the house, hands on his knees, head low as he tried to catch his breath, his wet hair covering his face. He had to get it together before going inside to stay with Mike, and he didn't want to worry the others.

A couple of drops of blood fell between his feet and only then Will noticed that his legs were covered with slug goo. He looked over at the pool and then up at the house. People would be coming back soon and he had one choice to make.

Standing straighter, Will took another deep breath, and then wiped at his nose to help stop the bleeding. And then, making his choice, he turned to the house again, where he could go to the bathroom and clean up a bit before going back to pretend that everything was completely fine as he'd been doing for the past month.

A whole week passed until some action happened again. They should have had more things to do now that those cocoons were found, Will and his boys, but the fact that about thirty people had saw it too didn't give them a big time span to gather enough information to have a start point before the police arrived. So they paired with Nancy and Jonathan in the hopes to have faster progress, but so far no good.

Mike swore to God that he had seen something similar in one of his D&D master books, but it was a hell of a long shot. They already had found answers for two monsters with the help of Dungeons and Dragons, but who was to guarantee that this monster would share the same similarities?

Part of Will wanted to believe that it'd be that simple, but most of him just wanted to flee, even if just in mind. And it had been harder to do that since Maya left, his main source of distraction. To read had

been increasing his headaches, leading his mom to consider that he was suffering from migraines, so he'd been avoiding it lately.

With nowhere else to go, Will was turning to music. He wasn't like Mike or Dustin with their music backgrounds, or naturally talented like Ellie, but he knew what good music was, and he very much enjoyed his job at the store. He also listened to Hercules's mix once, twice or five times and he really enjoyed it. It was a mess of mainstream stuff, but it was charming and the joy in Hercules's eyes when Will said that he had enjoyed the mix was worth anything else.

"What are going to do tomorrow?" Hercules asked one afternoon. The store was empty except for them both, and Will had put the *Top Gun* soundtrack to play, which wasn't a very good idea, he came to think as he looked into Hercules's eyes. That *Take my breath away* song was causing some weird reaction in him.

"Nothing, not even work," Will answered. "It's my day off," he explained. "I mean, I'll have to babysit my sister for the evening, but as for the rest, no, nothing."

Hercules bit his lower lip. He was shy, but very beautiful, that guy, blonde with the brown eyes and the Greek complexion. Not like a Greek god, that wasn't what Will meant, but as someone undeniably Greek, even if you didn't see his last name full of consonants and odd-formed syllables.

"Would you…" he started and Will raised an eyebrow. "Would you like to come over to my house for a while?"

The younger boy smiled.

"Are you finally asking me on a date? A couple of days before you leave for college?"

Hercules blushed violently, making Will's smile widen. He had been expecting that for a long time, and by now he didn't think it'd happen anymore. But here it was, Hercules had finally grown the balls to ask him out. Will got up from his chair behind the counter. Hercules cleared his throat.

"I'm actually… inviting you over. For… coffee," he explained.

"Coffee?" Will echoed incredulously as he went around the counter. Hercules nodded. "You know I love coffee."

"Yeah, and maybe some of my mom's achládi jam with toast and mantaríni… cake," he swallowed, because by this point Will was so close to him. "Uh…"

"Hercules," Will said as softly as he could. "I'm sure that's all delicious and don't get me wrong, I *will* want to prove it, but I believe we can stop pretending, huh?"

"Huh?" Hercules echoed a little out of breath. Before he could do or say anything else, however, Will held on the front of his shirt, pulling him for a much anticipated kiss.

It seemed to come as a shock to Hercules at first, but he soon went on with it, both hands cupped Will's cheeks as they kissed, and if anyone thought about going in the store at the moment, they doubled back and waited for a better moment to come back.

That kiss had nothing on the others that followed the next day. As if he'd been liberated, Hercules completely dived in, and Will was more than happy to be there for him – and *in* him, if he must put it that way. Hercules's spacey room with all his things already packed for his move wasn't romantic, but was everything they needed right there and then.

For a day, or an afternoon, they had enough. Outside, heavy clouds hid the sun, threatening to bring down a storm, but inside the house behind Hawkins Museum, in the bedroom on the top of the stairs, Will and Hercules were very well.

"This is…" Will said licking his fingers and savoring the piece of cake he had just devoured. He was leaning against the headboard and Hercules was laying on his side, looking up at him. "Tangerine? What's the name in Greek again?"

"Mantaríni," Hercules said. He did keep his promise of feeding Will that afternoon.

"And honey?"

"Méli and karýdia, a little bit of veríkoko," he continued and Will started to laugh.

"You know I'm taking Latin, right?"

Hercules sighed and then smiled.

"Yes, uh… it's honey and nuts, and some apricot to make everything taste better," he said observing Will reach for another piece of cake from the plate on top of a box. A small bit fell on his chest and Hercules used his finger to wipe it off.

"Greeks sure like their sugar," Will said with his mouth full, but watching Hercules lick his finger. "This tastes really good, actually."

"I know, I'm gonna miss it."

They were silent for a moment; Will completely aware of the way Hercules eyed him like he had been since they first met several months ago. It was a mix of admiration and intimidation that was both parts weird and lovely. The older boy was the first to talk again.

"So," he started sitting up in front of Will with his legs crossed. "The question that lingers." Here it comes. Will braced himself. "I've seen you with girls, and guys, and obviously you're here now, but you also have a thing going on with Lexi Solaris…?"

"It's complicated," Will observed. Because it was.

"And of course we all know about your brother, he and Steve are kind of pioneers," Hercules continued and Will couldn't help but laugh.

"Pioneers?" he asked. "Hercules, this gay stuff has existed for a real long time, you know that, right? I mean, you're Greek, didn't you ever read Aristotle?"

The older boy blushed.

"Yeah, but Hawkins is a small town and they were *bold*, defying everything and everyone, it was incredible. Tell me that wasn't

awesome." Will shrugged.

The situation with Jon, Nancy and Steve *was* different and bold like he said, and Will would be lying if he'd say that it didn't inspire him to be himself even in the society they lived in, but at the same time… his situation was different.

"So," Hercules started again. "You're bi?"

Will looked right into his eyes.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

It was clear now how confused Hercules was, so he might as well explain.

"And I'm not gay, and I'm not straight. I'm just me, and I like people, that's all. I like minds and bodies that interest me, and I like to be different from what everyone expects. I have always been like that, I've never changed. Also, Jon and I are challenging our father," he added last minute, and Hercules raised an eyebrow. "I'm joking."

"How do you *do* that?" Hercules wondered. "How do you get out of a closet like that and get to the other side unscathed?"

"I have a heavy pair of balls, didn't you notice?" Will answered, and then laughed at Hercules's rosy cheeks. "Look, that's not the point. The point is, I was never in a closet. My mom raised me that way and I've never learned to hide any part of me. The reason I get to the other side unscathed is that there was never an "other side." I've always been just like that."

After that, they were silent again and Will checked his watch. Dustin had been checking some archives at the museum, so they would all get together to see if he had found something interesting, and it was almost time to go. He got up and fished his boxers and jeans from the floor.

"Already?" Hercules asked. Will smiled.

"Babysitter, remember? I better get going if I want to take a shower first."

"Shower here," he was offered and Will looked at Hercules.

"Cute," he said after zipping up his pants. "And tempting, but I really should go." He got his T-shirt and put it on, and then Hercules was there kissing him again – gently, passionately, and full of meaning.

"You coming to say goodbye tomorrow?" he asked when they broke apart, forehead to forehead.

"Yeah, of course!" Will assured and kissed Hercules again. "But only if you let me go now."

He did, and Will put on his sneakers, ran his fingers through his hair and hung his backpack on his right shoulder. He got another piece of that mantaríni cake before he headed to the door; with a last look back, Will left the room, and the house. He was feeling… happy, which was something lately.

He walked past the back of the museum, bee-lining to the right side and once he was on the sidewalk he saw Dustin on the steps of the museum smoking a cigarette.

"You're late," Dustin said as Will approached.

"*You* are early," he argued dropping his backpack on a step. "Can I have one?"

"Sure," he offered the pack to Will, who got it as he sat by Dustin's side. The lighter was inside. "Mrs. Androutsos was constantly crying today, so she told me I could come outside whenever it was too much for me."

Will chuckled, puffing out a cloud of smoke before he could give back the pack or put the cigarette between his fingers.

"Only son is leaving the nest, gotta give her that," he said and Dustin shrugged.

"Man, I think my parents will throw a party when I finally leave for college," he speculated. "They'd finally be rid of all the boys."

They laughed.

"I think that scenario is very likely," Will confessed, and in return he got punched in the arm. "Look, there they come!"

He pointed at the street, where Mike and Lucas were biking in their direction. They skidded in front of the stairs and hopped out of their bikes, going up the stairs two steps at a time.

"Hey guys," they greeted almost at the same time. Lucas sat a couple of steps down from Will and Dustin and Mike stood in front of them more to their right.

"You're late," the first pair to arrive said in unison.

"*You're early*," Lucas argued. They were one synchronized group. "Plus, some of us still have to work."

"Hey, I am working!" Dustin protested. "It's just my smoke break."

"That your smoke break too, Byers?" Mike joked as he refused the offer of a cigarette with a shake of head.

"That's actually my after-sex smoke," he threw the fact out that casually as he smoked, and the others just looked at him confused. "It was my first time today, guys."

Silence. And then-

"I thought your first time was a couple of weeks ago with Maya," Mike said, vaguely pointing at Lucas, who shuddered. Will nodded.

"That was my first time with a *girl*," he explained. "Today was my first time with a *guy*."

After a second of consideration, they all let out an impressed "Oh!", and then Dustin looked back at the museum, making the connections to let out another impressed "Oh!"

"Was it any different?" Mike asked curious. "Did you like it better?"

"I liked it the same and I don't see much difference," Will answered.

"You don't?" Dustin exclaimed surprised. "You just had sex with a *dude*, doesn't it differ from hot *curvalicious* Maya Sinclair?" Will shrugged and Dustin looked around as if waiting for validation from the others, but Mike just seemed curious and Lucas was indifferent.

"You're just shocked because you're straight," Will argued, which was a valid argument. "But really, sex is just sex, dude. Doesn't matter if the other person has a dick or a pair of boobs."

"Not for you, it seems," Lucas commented. "I really don't get the hype over it, though."

"Oh, Lucas," Will said, a hand to his chest, cigarette between his lips. "When you stop being the ultimate virgin, then you'll know. Right, Mike?"

Dustin chuckled.

"Mike is an ultimate virgin too, forgot?"

He didn't. But Will liked to pretend he did just to throw him off.

"Oh, yeah! Every day he lets pass a perfectly good opportunity to make out with supermodel receptionist *Spencer Hall* in the company's toilet!"

"You're not seriously suggesting that I should make out with my boss's daughter under his very nose, are you?" Mike exclaimed, blushing a little.

"That's called seizing the moment, Michael," Will argued. "You don't do that enough, you know."

"Yeah, I'm not seizing the moment the way you do," Mike replied. "You know half of the town is talking about your and Hercules's "indiscretion" from yesterday?"

Will smiled.

"I'm aware."

"I thought you said you don't have time for other people's closets," Lucas reminded.

"Look, it was his choice, okay?" Will defended himself. "He finally came to me – in many different ways." The boys let out a disgusted '*ew!*' that didn't interrupt him. "And he's leaving. Better to leave liberated than to stay locked down."

"Yeah, he's leaving, but you're staying," Mike said. "What about that? You know there's a lot of homophobic people in this town."

"My dad is the Chief of police," Will replied, instead of telling them that he was partially scared of those who were ignorant. The thing was, he was not letting that fear take over. "He's not my *dad* dad, but he's the dad that matters. You bet I can count on Hop to beat some people up in case of need."

Besides, if he'd get strong enough, he could just explode the brains of those trying to harm him, but he wouldn't say that part out loud. Not after the amount of time the four of them spent teaching El that it was *not* okay to kill those who disagree with them.

"Look, I have to go back to work," Lucas interrupted. "Dustin, did you find something that would help us or not?"

"Oh, yeah!" Dustin exclaimed. After all, that had been the reason they gathered there in the first place. They all turned to him waiting to hear anything he had found out. "No, I didn't find anything yet, sorry guys."

They all whined in different levels of frustration.

"Seriously?" Will complained tossing the butt of his cigarette beyond the handrails. "I have to go take care of Callie, dude, and you just let me stay here talking and talking?"

"*Please*, you like to keep talking and talking," Dustin replied, which was the truest of the truths, but Will completely ignored his comment making a big show of opening his backpack to get his roller skates out.

"You are all terrible friends," he insisted, and the others scoffed and rolled their eyes.

"You know what, Will," Mike said going down the stairs. He had to go back to work too. "Next year, for your birthday, we're sending you to drama camp. It'll suit you."

Lucas laughed, but Dustin held Will's arm with a serious expression.

"Don't listen to him," he said. "And don't you dare try for the drama club this year, it's *my* year."

Will tilted his head.

"As if I could ever act better than you," he offered, tying the laces of his roller skates.

"Yeah, but tell me they wouldn't choose pretty charming Will over braces Dustin, I dare you!"

Will snatched his arm from Dustin's hand and shook his head.

"Relax, D, I don't like the drama club anyway."

"Will, you coming?" called Lucas. He and Mike already were in their bikes. Will and Dustin got up, but while one went down the steps, the other went up.

"I am, I am," he said watching his step. He should've gone down before putting those skates on.

"See if you find anything useful this time!" Lucas shouted to Dustin, who turned to them annoyed.

"You know y'all are a bunch of annoying little shits, right?" he complained.

"Just do what you have to do, Dustin," Mike replied very calmly, putting on his leader posture. Dustin just rolled his eyes and turned around again, back to work, like the others were doing, except for Will, whose work was a six week old baby girl waiting for him.

Joyce and Hopper had one of those high school reunions to go to, that was why Will offered to stay with Callie. Not that his mom really wanted to *go* to that thing, seeing that apparently no one liked her and she hated everyone, but Hop made a good point of judging people together that was hard to pass. So Will got home when they were finishing getting ready, showered and was ready by the time Hopper was ushering Joyce out the door.

"There are six bottles in the fridge, when she gets hungry, I set a timer-" Joyce was saying as Hop lead her out.

"Mom, I know," Will replied patiently. In her baby seat on the sofa, Callie made a lazy baby sound.

"Okay," Joyce agreed, and then she disentangled from Hopper's touch. "Oh, her diapers, you have to make sure that they aren't too tight, but they also can't be loose, or you know, it'll be a mess. Look, maybe this isn't a good idea."

Hopper sighed dramatically, but Will made his point by taking a risky decision and taking Callie in his arms. Half of the times someone disturbed her from her quiet place, she'd throw a tantrum, so it'd be 50/50 chance of him screwing it up.

"No, Will!" Joyce exclaimed, and then covered her mouth, worried about startling Callie. "Hop, you go, I'll stay and-"

"Mom, are you even *seeing* this?" Will asked as he lightly rocked side to side. He looked down at Callie and she was staring right at him with interested eyes. She had just started focusing on them better and already could tell when it was mom or Hop with her, but she liked her big brothers just fine too. A movement caught Will's attention for a second, but he still focused on her. "You're fine, right, Callie?" he said softly, touching her cheek. She held his finger firmly. "We're both fine, aren't we? Mom and dad can go, we'll behave."

Nervously, Joyce sighed. Hop rested a hand on her shoulder and Will looked up at them and smiled.

"I'll page you if anything happens, I swear. Now go have a good time and relax," he said. "I've got this."

"Okay," Joyce finally agreed and stepped in his direction. She hesitated for a moment, and then went all the way to Will to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "My beautiful boy," she said sweetly. "You need to cut your hair."

Will chuckled.

"Bye, mom," he replied instead. "You look pretty! Will make everyone jealous."

"She really will," Hopper agreed and she blushed as she passed by him.

"Oh, shut up you two."

Hopper looked at Will one more time before closing the door and mouthed a "*thank you, kid*" that Will replied with a nod. As soon as the door clicked, he looked back, towards the corridor, but there was nothing there. Outside, it thundered. He looked down at Callie again.

"It's you and I now, Calista," he said. She still was holding his finger. "And you know what? We're gonna have a great time! We have about two and a half hours of doing whatever the hell we want until Jon arrives, so we better make the best of it." He walked back to the couch and put Callie back in her seat. "Now, if I'm not mistaken, there's a baseball game about to start in just a few minutes, so…"

He turned on the TV, but halfway through the first inning Callie was definitely not feeling it. Maybe it had to do with the fact that her diaper was full, but to be honest, it wasn't even his team playing and he wasn't feeling that game either, so Will turned down the TV, changed his sister and tried a new approach – books.

"I know exactly the perfect book for you, Callie," he guaranteed. "I'll be right back, okay? Bark and Molly will take care of you real quick."

Will ran under the rain to the shed by the house where they had stored many boxes, he looked for one specifically, one that said 'Will's child books', that he himself had separated when they started to make the changes around the house. He found it easily and rushed back to the house.

It took him less than three minutes to go and come, but even so he sighed relieved when he saw that Callie was in the exact same way he had left her. The dogs were the ones acting strangely, Bark on the floor, Molly on the couch, both of them turned to the kitchen this time, and they were both crying a bit, which made Will frown.

"What's up with you two?" he wondered, and then dropped the box by the couch and ushered Molly down. Will turned to Callie. "It's here in this box, Callie, the perfect book. I thought about giving it to Ellie, because, well, you'll see, but I was afraid she'd find it childish."

Bark cried a little louder, and Will smiled. He *knew* it.

"I know you're here," he said, maybe louder than necessary, and then turned to the kitchen. Only half of her was visible. "You're lurking."

"No, I'm not," El said with her quiet voice, and Bark got up, started to round her curiously. Will just raised an eyebrow and she avoided eye contact. "Okay, maybe I am a little. Hi, boy!" she kneeled down and ran a hand through Bark's soft fur.

"Are you checking up on me?" Will inquired. El shook her head. He saw that she was wearing a bikini.

"No," she replied and got up. She walked closer carefully, eyes going from the box in front of Will to Callie. "I'm checking up on her."

"Oh, and I just happen to be around whenever you do that?" he said and El looked at him innocently. "This thing goes both ways, you know?" Will observed pointing between them. "I can sense your presence too, even when you lurk."

"I wasn't-"

"Don't bother," he cut her, and El closed her mouth. After a second, they both smiled.

"It's easier when you're around," she confessed. "Like… amplifier." El gestured largely to exemplify, and Will frowned. Was that what he was? An amp? "No, not just that," she continued. "You're so much more."

Will looked up at El and clarification passed by his eyes.

"Do you know what I am?"

El shook her head.

"Not yet, but I'll get there. Promise," she assured. There was a way El made promises that was so true and heartfelt. Will believed her, trusted her.

"Where *are* you now, anyway?" he asked, vaguely pointing at her.

"The lake," El answered. "It's like a deprivation tank, just neater. And scarier sometimes, because there's fish and they touch you sometimes. People think I'm weird, though."

Will laughed.

"Well, I guess some things never change, then," he joked and she shook her head.

"What is it?" El asked pointing at the box he had brought to the house. "Which book you didn't give me but will give to her?"

"Oh," Will exclaimed lightly, and he reached for the lid, opened the box. There were many books in there, and the one he was looking for was white, yellow and green, a hardcover bigger than most books. It was easy to find. "Here."

El stepped closer and watched him dust off the cover of the book. The copy was beaten, as if it was read many times, but also conserved. The title explained everything.

"*Hop on Pop*?" El read, and the two siblings looked at Callie. She was staring right at El with curious, interested eyes as she sucked on her little hand. "Her eyes are turning blue."

Will nodded, and reached to make her stop sucking her hand.

"Just like Hop's," he said. "You don't need to come so much, you know?"

"I'm afraid she will forget me," El confessed. Will looked at her and shook his head.

"El, she'll be *two months old* when you come back. Seriously, you're worrying about nothing."

El shrugged.

"I want her to remember me anyway," she said firmly. Well, there was nothing Will could do about it. "I don't want to have to catch up."

He nodded again, understanding her point. Actually, there was something he could do.

"I'll try to be around more often to amplify for you, then, okay?"

Her smile got bigger and she nodded excitedly.

"Thanks," El said sincerely. She sat on the armchair by his side. "Are you going to read the book?"

Will smiled and got Callie's pacifier before he opened the book.

"How long you can stay?"

"I think I have a few minutes until someone interrupts me," she said. "Everyone is supposed to shower before dinner, and there's only half an hour left before they start serving."

"Okay, you can read the rest of the book when you come back," Will said, and El nodded. He crossed his legs Indian style on the sofa and brought Callie's seat closer, and then he turned the first page. Will started to read. "*Up, pup. Pup is up. Cup, pup. Pup in cup…*"

[...]

Elle Hopper

El checked her shin guards for the tenth time in the past half hour, giving special attention to her right leg, the one that only recently had been mended after being broken because of this exact sport. She made sure that the guards were in the right position, and then

covered them with her pink socks. The color of the socks was a good camouflage to the ring she was wearing on her right index finger, but the small golden piece of jewelry would have to go back into her bag anyway, she couldn't play with it.

She pulled the bag from under the bench she was sitting on and opened a side pocket where her gloves were, but she took an extra minute to look at the ring again. El touched the tiny pink heart-shaped stones that adorned the ring with gentle fingers and smiled, enchanted. *Mike,* she thought dreamily, but any further day-dreaming she would have was interrupted when someone called her name.

"Ellie?"

El turned around and saw Will on the other side of the fence that separated the public in the bleachers from the players on the benches area. He had tied his hair in a low bun, but that was the only difference in him from when they had last seen each other. She jumped up excitedly and rushed to give him a hug.

"Yes, you made it!"

"Of course we did," he said, smiling too. They resumed their hugging. "You think we'd miss your first official game?"

"Well, it's not an *official* game," El corrected. "Where are the others?"

Will pointed to his left and she followed his directions, spotting Joyce, Hop, Jon and Callie in the second row right in front the middle of the field. They waved and she waved too.

"There are quite a lot of scouts here, though," Will observed, and El shrugged. A lot of people had been talking about those scouts for the past couple of weeks, but she didn't know what it meant and she didn't ask anyone, not even Jennifer. "How are you feeling?"

"Nervous," El said, with a nervous sigh to emphasize it.

"You don't need to be nervous, you're gonna nail it."

"You don't know that," she accused, and Will shrugged.

"You're right, I don't. But I hope."

El smiled. Will was good at knowing what to say at the right moment, and that was a relief. She never knew when to say anything, and was constantly asking the wrong questions, or the right questions at the wrong time, both to the wrong person. Quite often, though, Will didn't know when to shut up. One would guess that he knew how to be quiet, seeing that he had so many secrets to keep, but secrecy had the opposite effect on him. Will talked his way out of practically everything.

That, among other things, was why they worked so well together, why Lucas and Lexi liked to call them "the weird twinsies". El and Will completed each other.

"How are *you* feeling?" she asked him, and he smiled one of his crooked smiles.

"I'm dandy," he replied, and she narrowed her eyes. "Seriously, I feel great."

She didn't completely believe him. El rested a hand on his chest, right above his scar, and frowned.

"It's wearing off," she said staring at her fingers. Will breathed in and out very slowly.

"I know," he replied quietly. El looked up at him worried and Will smiled, just a small turn on the corner of his lips. "Don't worry about that now, sis, you gotta game to play! I'll be fine."

"Okay," El said a little reluctantly, but deciding to let it pass this time. He did seem fine, and there still was time for them to look into it. She offered him her ring instead of grilling him more. "Can you take care of this for me?"

"Sure, let me see," Will took the ring and observed it close. "Pretty. Where did you get it?"

"Someone gave it to me," she said vaguely. Will side-eyed her.

"Who?"

For some reason, El supposed he already knew who, and that was why she didn't say anything. After enough silence, Will sighed and rolled his eyes in his best "*Seriously?*" silent expression.

"It arrived a little after my birthday, and I like it!" El rushed to say. "It's pretty and pink and it suits me."

"Of course it does, he knows you better than anyone!" Will replied. He sounded more tired than annoyed, and he looked at her apologetically – for what she couldn't tell. "Ellie…"

"Look, we're not getting back together. That's not what this is about," she assured him. "It's just a friendly gift."

He sighed again, but put the ring on his pinky finger, his way of telling that he'd take care of it while she was in the game. El smiled.

"Thanks, Will," she said sweetly.

"Hopper!" Foussy called. El looked back and all the girls were gathering around their coach, so she better get going.

"We'll see you at the end of the game," Will said. "Good luck!"

"Thanks," El said before joining the other girls. She was in the blue team with Jennifer and Roxie, and they were passing the colorful vests around. Jennifer handed to her the number 11.

"It's time, girls," Foussy announced. "You've been training for two months for this day and you have a lot to prove, but most of all, go there and do your very best, or else nothing matters. Hayes," she pointed at Jennifer, who was putting her 27 vest on. "You had to leave last year before finishing the program, but this year you're still here. They are waiting to see you. You're playing right wing. Kelley," she turned to Roxie. "They already know you, all you gotta do is what you already know. Left wing. Hopper."

El caught her breath. She spent the whole summer camp sure that she would never catch up with the other girls, worried that her best wouldn't be enough, especially when Cresta grilled her in the ice rink, having her repeat drill after drill until she got them right. Even after the director of the camp told her that there was a chance she

progressed enough to maybe be in the starting lineup of the final game, she didn't hold her breath on the expectation. But now Foussy was calling her name this soon. El looked at the coach expectantly.

"Midfielder forward. Think you can handle it?"

No.

"Yeah, absolutely," El replied, and then looked at Jennifer with wide eyes mouthing a shocked '*oh, my God!*'

Foussy went on telling everyone in which position they would play, but El only vaguely listened to it, which wasn't a very good beginning considering that, well, she was the midfielder forward and had to know which players she'd work with. After everything was assigned, they all got together to a loud "Go blue!" before the game's warm up started.

"I can't believe Foussy is actually putting you to be midfielder forward today," Roxie hissed, pulling El closer by her arm. "If you screw this up for me with all these scouts in the bleachers, I swear to God, Hopper-"

"Why would she screw anything up for anyone?" interrupted Jennifer coming to El's rescue. "It's not just your neck on the line!"

"Girls," Foussy said very calmly. "Let's all be friendly, otherwise your teamwork won't, you know, work. Right Kelley?"

Still annoyed, but clearly more concerned about her position as a player, Roxie let go of El's arm. Foussy smiled, but it wasn't one of those warm and fuzzy smiles, it was more one of those 'you better not make me have to do this again' smiles that El knew so well.

"Now, warm up."

The three girls broke apart and headed to the field, but the coach called El again for a quick chat.

"Hopper, I hope you understand that starting with you is a risk," she said, and the girl nodded. "You're new and fresh, and your sensibility as a player is something I've never seen before, but you *are* new and

you can't let your nerves get the best of you, or else I'll bench you. You have one shot. Screw it up and you'll only play on this field again during next year's camp. Understood?"

Well, wasn't that a nice pep talk?

"Yes, ma'am," El replied with a nod.

Finally, she was allowed to go warm up and the moment she stepped on the field, all her worries vanished. She had worked really hard to get to this point, and there was no shame in seizing the opportunity of leading the girls in a great game. And there was no way in hell El would make this game less than great.

"Don't worry about Foussy much," Jennifer said, warming up by her side. "She gets extra competitive when Samson is coaching the other team," she gestured to the other team's bench, where Samson was standing with her clipboard. She was the 14U field trainer, and apparently their beef went on to as far as when both of them played in college. "Just… play the way I know you can play and we'll be fine."

Actually, that was the best advice El was given the whole day, and it worked marvelously, especially when the other girls from her team came telling El that they trusted her. Midfielder was without a doubt the hardest position to play, because it demanded self knowledge and a good read of the game, which also meant that she was supposed to know her teammates very well in order to make the best decisions. Her position as a midfielder forward was very similar to a volleyball setter, or a soccer playmaker.

The blue team won, and by the end of the game, El played for a little over forty minutes out of the sixty official length, and scored one goal, but she assisted five others – two scored by Jennifer, two by Roxie and another by one of the defenders. There still was the 14U and Pee Wee games to happen, but both Foussy and Samson told El that she had a great chance of getting the best midfielder medal.

She hit the showers after the game and only after that El went to meet her family for lunch, and she was greeted by excited shouts from Joyce and Hopper that made Jonathan and Will shake their

heads embarrassed.

"Baby, we're so proud of you!" Joyce said hugging El fondly. "You played so well, and your goal was so pretty!"

"She doesn't even know what she's talking about," Hopper dismissed. Callie had grown a lot since El left, but she still was so little that he could hold her with one arm only. El looked up at him and he smiled. "It was the neatest goal of the whole damn game, baby!"

El smiled and let Hop engulf her in an embrace.

"Tell us the truth, El," Will provoked. "Did you cheat?"

"No," she answered dryly, the way she normally answered those direct questions. Of course she strongly considered using her powers to get the ball more easily, but would she ever know if she was really good at any sport if she cheated like that?

"Number eleven?" a man called, catching the whole family's attention. "Hopper?"

El nodded.

"Yes," she said kindly.

"Wow, such a soft voice," he said. "Wouldn't ever imagine, considering how fiercely you played."

She looked at Jon, who was just frowning, and then at Hopper, who still looked intimidating, even holding a baby, before she looked up at the man again.

"Right, where are my manners? Hi," he offered his hand to her, but Hopper was quicker to shake it, practically stepping in front of El. "Dick Maesi. I'm Pruitt's associate from Ohio University. You're Mr. Hopper, I suppose."

"Chief Hopper, and you suppose correctly," Hop corrected and let go of Mr. Maesi's hand, but didn't step from in front of El, who had to step to the side to see the man better. "You said Ohio University?"

"Yes, I did," Maesi said flipping through some papers he was carrying in a folder. "And I couldn't help but notice that her name barely shows in here, even if she's a remarkable young player. Where did you play before?"

"Hawkins High, in Indiana," El answered right away and Mr. Maesi waited, as if he was expecting her to say something more.

"Is that it?" he asked a little confused, and the whole family nodded.

"She started playing a few months ago," Jonathan explained, and the man even stepped back.

"Really?" They all nodded again. Maesi looked at El. "Incredible. You should try for Ohio's minor team, did you think about it?"

"I did," El told him. "My friend Jennifer, she made it to the state's team last season."

"There are some great teams of tradition in Ohio, and I'm sure you would find a place there to play and evolve," he encouraged. "I sure would like to see you play more often, and I'm certain my associate would too."

"Mr. Maesi," Joyce interfered cautiously. "Ohio University. Do you mean to say that your university is already scouting our daughter?"

"If she gets in a good team and continues to play like that, constantly evolving, Mrs. Hopper," Maesi said fishing a card from his pocket and offering it to El. No one corrected him about Joyce's last name. "I don't see why we wouldn't."

Excitedly, Joyce put an arm around El's shoulders as the girl stared at the card with shiny eyes.

"Oh, that's so incredible, Mr. Maesi!" Joyce said. "I would love to talk more about El's possibilities with you. Would you mind joining us for lunch?"

Mr. Maesi chuckled. He was a tall man about Joyce and Hop's age, it seemed, and he was really fit. His card said that he was an assistant coach.

"Well, I *am* supposed to be impartial and it should not look like I play favorites, so unfortunately, I will have to decline," he said politely. "But she has my card, and if she makes it to a team this fall, I'd love to get a call from you. Now if you'll excuse me."

"Yeah, of course!" El said excitedly and they all watched the man leave. When Mr. Maesi was distant enough, Jonathan punched her lightly on the arm.

"Fifteen and already with scouts watching you, Ellie, way to go!" he said proudly. She was beyond enthusiastic too, but there was still something she wanted to know.

"Is that what a scout is?" El asked, and after a moment of silence, Jonathan smiled.

"Why don't we go have lunch, sis," he said softly. "And then we'll explain everything as we eat, and you can ask as many questions about college as you want. What do you think?"

Jonathan offered his arm, and she took it without a second thought.

"Lead the way?" he asked and she pointed to their right.

"It's easy to find," El said. "I'm so glad you are all here! And glad to be going home soon. I loved camp, but… I miss home and the dogs."

Jonathan kept his promise of telling her all the things she wanted to know. Most of them were questions she would've asked him as soon as he went home, but he went home the day Callie was born, and two days after she was going to camp, so they really didn't have the time before.

El's plans were to go to her bunk, get her things, put everything in the car and then go watch the ice hockey game of the 14U. She had trained ice mostly with them and grew fond of those kids, they were very funny. Also, ice hockey was the one with mixed teams, which was cooler. Jennifer said that the teams had to be mixed with boys and girls because there was a new ice hockey camp in Ontario for a couple of years now, and most kids were going there now. There weren't enough kids to train girls and boys separately like field

hockey anymore, even if their program still was so strong.

However, El had to adapt her plans a little as soon as they walked out of the cafeteria, because a group of girls were chatting outside and when they saw her, they started to gesticulate for her to come closer. Frowning, El looked around, but she was the only person they knew there, and Joyce told her that it was okay if she wanted to go talk to her friends, they would wait.

So she went. Most of her confusion was due the fact that those girls were the group that called her weird and they were always the ones to interrupt her when she tried to reach for Will and Callie in the lake. Roxie was in the front.

"Nice game today, Hopper," she said, making El even more confused.

"Thanks," she said. It had taken a while for her to start answering like that instead of '*I know,*' that would be more appropriate, but less polite.

Good thing about Roxie Kelley, she wasn't known for small talk, so El's confusion soon dissipated.

"Look, who's the guy with the man bun?"

Oh.

That explained it.

"That's my brother. Will," El told them.

"*He's* Will?" Roxie wondered. She wasn't even looking at El anymore, just at him. "No wonder you dream about him so much, he's like… Tom Cruise's little brother. That's how hot he is."

"I guess," she replied. "And they are not dreams, they're visions."

"As if that makes it any less weird," Roxie said shrugging. "Does he have a girlfriend?"

El chuckled and then shrugged.

"Why everyone in this camp wants to know who has a boyfriend or girlfriend and who doesn't? That's a little pathetic."

All the girls looked at her and El closed her mouth. They were about seven, and of course it didn't matter that they outnumbered her, she could take them. She just didn't want to have to take them.

"Would you mind introducing your brother to us, Ellie?" Roxie said with that tone of hers that indicated that she was running out of patience.

El sighed and looked back at where her family was. She thought *Will*, and he looked right at her, so she gestured for him to come closer and he did.

"Will," she said, kind of bored. It had been her life for a few months now, since he started helping her learn how to skate. "These are the girls from my bunk. I mean, most of them. Girls, this is my brother Will. You each tell your n-"

"I'm Roxanne," Roxie interrupted El stepping forward and offering her hand. El just sighed. Will smiled and took her hand.

Charming as he was, he had no trouble chatting with all those girls, and everything escalated when Jennifer found them and jumped in his arms.

El excused herself and finally joined Joyce, Hop and Jonathan to go get her things. She showed them where most of the camp's spaces were as they went to her bunk, told them about the shelf of skates outside on the porch and how a few weeks ago there was this storm that filled the lake until the water reached as far as the first steps of their bunk.

She told them about night games and the drills she had to repeat in ice hockey, about how many times she fell on the ice and how every time she'd get a private with the older kids, this guy Sonic asked her if Jennifer had a boyfriend now, because she used to be his summer love and now she was totally bailing on him, but she couldn't tell him about Dustin because it was a secret that wasn't hers to tell. Also, she found out that the whole Dustin thing came as a surprise to the rest

of her family, so she should probably keep her mouth shut.

"You know," El said taking her *E. Hopper* strip from the skates' shelf before they all went to put her things in their car. "Jenny was super excited, because my initials are EJH and hers are JEH. She saw it on my stick, and when I told her that I'm Elle Jane, she thought it was so cool, because she's Jennifer Elliana. Is this more than a letters thing or is there another meaning…?"

"Nothing like that, baby," Joyce answered kindly. She was free of any bags because Callie woke up hungry, so she was feeding the baby as they went. "It's about having the same initials and nothing more. Sometimes, it's cooler when you have something in common with your friends, that's all. Maybe Jennifer felt closer to you because of it."

El guessed she understood that. She did feel close to Will from the moment she met him, because they have so much in common. And she felt close to Mike, because he always knew what she needed, even if she struggled to understand what he needed sometimes. And Dustin, he was enthusiastic about things that got her excited too.

"Yeah, I guess that's a cool thing to have in common," she finally said smiling.

They put everything in the car and then headed to the ice rink where the game would start in just a few minutes. Halfway through, Jennifer and Will joined them, both laughing about how he owed her now for saving his ass from "all those thirsty girls".

"Look, El, you're not coming back next year," Will said seriously and Jennifer chuckled. El frowned.

"Why not?"

"These girls are savages!" he explained. She wasn't impressed.

"I know," El said showing her arms. She had several bruises from two straight months of multiple trainings with teens that had been doing this sport thing for a very long time, and the arms weren't the only body parts with bruises.

Will's jaw dropped, but Jennifer dismissed it with a gesture.

"Please, did you see the one I got today?" she asked walking sideways to lift her shirt and show them the massive bruise on her back.

"Holy shit!" they all exclaimed. Jen just shrugged.

"Got a penalty out of it," she said. "And don't worry, I took like, three painkillers."

"Oh, that's why you're so happy!" Will exclaimed, playfully holding her cheeks and making her giggle. "You're super high!"

"Will, don't do that," Joyce tried to warn, but Jennifer only laughed more. They were entering in the arena.

"Look!" Jennifer pointed to the bleachers. "I told my parents to save us some seats."

"Elle?" someone called her when El turned to follow Jen to their seats. It was Verb, and he was wearing a referee shirt.

"I'll find you guys in a sec," she informed her parents, so they'd let her have this moment. El waited for them to enter the public's area before she went closer to Verb. "Found a new career?"

"What?" he exclaimed confused and she pointed at his shirt. "Oh, yeah, they asked me to referee the Pee Wee's game."

"That's nice," El said and waited. He was the one who called her in the first place, so he must have something to tell her.

"I won't see you again, will I?" Verb said. It wasn't at all what she expected to hear from him, though it was predictable.

"Well, you came of age to leave camp, and you're going to college next year," El pondered. "You have a whole life ahead of you as an ice hocker and stuff."

Verb smiled. It was funny how beautiful he was and how shy he could be at the same time. In the rink, he was one of the fiercest players El had seen, but put him in a normal situation and he'd be…

just Lennox.

"I heard you already caught the attention of Ohio Uni," he said and she nodded.

"Looks like," she confirmed. "And Mr. Maesi was thinking about being ahead of Pennsylvania State, whatever that means."

"Thinking?" Verb asked, and El gasped with her little slip.

"I mean *saying*," she quickly corrected. "He mentioned he wanted to be ahead of Penn State this time with the talent."

"Makes sense," Verb said. "These two are always fighting over students. Most players end up going to Michigan and Connecticut though."

"Oh, are there teams in Connecticut?" she said, suddenly interested. Verb nodded.

"A few. Why?"

"No reason," she said. El had learned by now that it was not a good thing to say that you wanted to go somewhere because of a boy, not even if that boy was your brother.

The sound of the whistle startled them and the public got louder as the game was closer to start. El sighed and looked up at Verb. He was looking at her too, like he had been the whole summer. Jennifer had told her that Verb had many summer girlfriends during his years as a camper, but even if El wasn't ready to date anyone – or didn't want to date anyone that wasn't Mike – he had been nothing but sweet to her. More than once she considering giving Verb a chance, but she always let the opportunity pass.

When she least expected, the camp was coming to an end and it was true. Verb would go to college, end up on a great team, make it to the national team and forget all about her sooner than expected.

"Verb?" El said softly. "Promise me something?"

"Yeah, of course," he said stepping closer. El bit her lip before talking

again.

"When you make it to the national team and you become this amazing player you can be… remember me, okay?"

Verb sighed enchanted, and his eyes had this distinct shade of green when he was mesmerized that was rather cute.

"As if I could ever forget you," he said softly. "Promise. But only if you promise not to forget me."

Automatically, El looked down at her hands, her thumb searching for the ring she was supposed to have on her index finger, but Will hadn't give her the ring back yet. She then looked up at Verb again, and with a last minute decision, she stepped closer, got on her tiptoes and kissed him.

For a moment, it seemed like he was in shock, but then his hands went around her waist bringing her even closer, and her hands went up his shoulders and neck, letting him kiss her ever so gently. She had only kissed one other person besides Mike so far, and that was only because she had said "dare" during a "truth or dare" game. This was different. She felt different.

She liked it.

But she also didn't know what to do once she went back to Hawkins, because it'd been easier without having Mike around. Had enough time passed for him to be her best friend like Dustin and Lucas were?

"That big, scary dude that keeps looking in our direction," Verb said when they broke from the kiss.

"He's my dad," El told him. "And he's a cop. But don't worry about him."

"Yeah?"

"He's mostly harmless," she said, her fingers on his jaw to direct his attention to her. They kissed again and it was good. It was really good.

"You really want to be remembered, Elle Hopper," Verb said.

The game already was ten minutes in when El joined her family in the bleachers and Jen elbowed her playfully. Will took the ring from his finger.

"Should I give you this back?" he asked, handing her the ring, and El took it, not without giving him the tongue first.

They decided to leave after the 14U games, even if that meant that neither El nor Jennifer would know if they got the best players medals or not. Because of Callie's baby chair, not all the siblings fit in Hopper's car, so El would return with the Hayes as well.

Will had brought her the Dr. Seuss book that she only knew a third of the story and she took it to read on the way. Jen was reading a book too, *Ender's Game*, that she was taking over two months to finish because their schedule was so crazy, but she was finally in the ending - that was great, if a bit confusing.

It started raining by the time they reached Indianapolis, and Jennifer turned the last page. She looked out the window and sighed, catching El's attention. The two girls looked at each other and smiled.

"It was good, right?" Jennifer said. She sounded tired, but happy. El nodded.

"As good as going home," she replied. Jen's smile widened.

"True that, Ellie," she said. "True that."

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a/n: I don't really know if there's really a beef between Ohio and Pennsylvania, I took it from *Dance Moms* (Abby vs Cathy, anyone? heh). I do know, though, that they are not part of the same conference, I just didn't add that because it wasn't necessary, I think.

I hope you guys liked the chapter and forgive me for taking so long to post. I'll try to write faster before my classes come back. I've to go back to German classes and that won't be easy. Well. I'm waiting for your reviews! And thanks for reading! :D

6. not how the game is played

Author's note: First of all, if you're having this chapter before the end of January, it's because my beta is super efficient, so a round of applause to Jenna, please!

For a second there I really thought that I was finally writing a shorter chapter, but lol. When I reached 9k words I was like well...

I hope you enjoy and don't get too mad at me.

IMPORTANT: I know a total of nothing about Dungeon and Dragons, so please don't care much about the specifics of the game here.

Also, do you have any idea of what they will be fighting in this fic? heh

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5. not how the game is played

August, 1986

Dustin Henderson

"Well, this isn't creepy at all," Dustin sighed alone in his room as he looked through a bunch of paintings and drawings Will had given to him.

Not exactly *given*, more like loaned, but anyway. They were creepy. Maybe even a little disturbing. Dustin had been looking at them for quite some days now, because Will had assured him that there was something similar in the museum, and maybe he could have access to it, seeing that he worked there.

So far, Dustin didn't have much success at the museum and when he showed the drawings to Mr. Androutsos, the man couldn't inform him on anything. Meanwhile, all he had was no answers and some legit nightmare material.

His concentration was broken by his nephew's loud laugh. When at

home, Dustin could hardly accomplish anything, not with Andre around, and it frustrated him because he couldn't help the feeling that something was holding them back.

Sighing, he dropped all the papers on his nightstand and was ready to go make a sandwich when there was a knock on his door.

"It's open!" he exclaimed, and before he could turn around, somebody opened the door.

"Hey, you have a visitor!" Femke said overenthusiastically. He was standing behind Jennifer Hayes, who was just looking at Dustin with this smile of hers. Dustin smiled too.

"Jenny," he greeted cordially.

"You forgot your book," she said showing him the copy of *Ender's Game*. Before he could say anything else, she stepped inside and shoved the book on his chest.

Dustin took a look at the cover. He would probably have to start over the reading because he didn't remember anything. He'd spent the summer worrying about Shakespearian plays and weird supernatural cocoons; there wasn't much space to keep the first couple of chapters of the book fresh in his head.

When he looked up, Femke was still standing there in the corridor, which made him frown. His older brother gave him an impressed thumbs up, making him roll his eyes.

"Don't you have to take care of a toddler?" he asked before closing the door on his brother's face. Dustin turned to Jennifer. "I'm sorry about him."

"It's okay," she said. "I feel like I still owe him for letting us stay at his place to watch that game."

"He doesn't shut up about it!" Dustin exclaimed. "Keeps asking when me and my friends are heading to Chicago again, that we can totally spend a weekend there. Seven people!"

"Well, you guys are from a pretty big household," Jen observed.

"Tell me about it," he sighed. "How was camp?"

"It was good," she answered, her eyes shone a little. "This guy from Brown gave me his card."

"*Brown*?" Dustin asked. "Ivy League Brown?"

"Are there others?" Jen said. "He said he saw me playing for Ohio last season and was glad to see me in camp too. He didn't know I go there, because I wasn't in the final game last year. Not even if I didn't have to come back for my grandpa's funeral he probably wouldn't have seen me, I think. I was with the 14U."

That was so cool. Jennifer already was paving her way to a great school, just like him. Dustin always wanted to move to a big city, study in a big college, that was why he always wanted to –

"What's wrong?" Jennifer asked frowning. Dustin shook his head.

"Nothing, it's just…" he said frowning too. "My number one option is Stanford."

Jennifer closed her mouth and said nothing, mostly because if you looked at it coldly, there was nothing to say about it. They hadn't even started their sophomore year yet, there was no guarantee that they'd make it to the colleges they wanted. They had a lot of time left yet. When she spoke, it was about something else entirely.

"Why did you cut your hair?"

"Work," Dustin replied, glad to think of something else. He put the book on the nightstand on top of Will's papers.

"At the *museum*?" Jen asked raising an eyebrow.

"I wanted to make a good impression," he explained. His hair wasn't *that* short, but it was way shorter than before, just a little over a couple of inches long now.

Jennifer reached and touched a curl that was falling on his forehead. She curled it around her finger, a gesture that he grew used to and kind of missed in the past couple of months.

Dustin's eyes lowered to Jenny's exposed shoulders, noticing that her usually white skin was tanned, with some tan marks too. She looked so fresh and beautiful with her summer clothes and her hair down, he couldn't believe his luck.

"Elle knows about us," she said still fidgeting with his hair. Shocker. "You're not surprised."

Dustin shrugged.

"It's El, she knows everything," he said. "It's her super power."

Jennifer raised an eyebrow again.

"Aren't you afraid she'll tell someone?"

Now, that was a little offensive and Dustin stepped back. There were so many things wrong in Jennifer's assumption that he didn't even know where to start.

"Have you *met* El?" was the first thing that came out of his mouth and Jen sighed.

"I know," she said apologetically. "I mean, if Sonic kept coming to ask me if I was seeing someone, it probably was because she didn't tell him anything."

Dustin gestured as if saying "*See?*" and then-

"Who's Sonic?"

Jennifer shrugged, smiling and avoiding eye contact. Okay, he wouldn't press it. Not even if it meant that for some reason that guy had to ask Jennifer over and over about a possible someone else. It wasn't as if they were something anyway.

"You have a tan this time," he said instead, and then she looked at him, her smile larger.

"That's what you get with so many sunny days," Jenny said excitedly. She pushed her hair from her shoulders. "See? This one is from the training bra during morning trainings, this one," she turned around

and held her hair high to show her back, the cross mark between her shoulder blades seemed new. "Is from catch the flag before dinner and this one," she pointed at the mark that seemed to be from what she wore with more frequency, and lowered the rack of her top a little, showing him part of her breasts and making Dustin catch his breath. "Is the bikini I wore while waiting for Ellie to get her crazy ass out of the lake day after day."

Dustin took one, two deep breaths and then he turned to lock the door, because there was a nosy toddler in the house, and when he turned around to face Jenny again she was there kissing him, and he immediately kissed her back, because *Gosh*, he missed this girl! He missed her clear blue eyes and her nice blonde hair and her soft lips, and how she leaned into him and allowed him to hold her, even if he didn't know that she had a bad bruise on her back and would only find out about it later.

"You know," Dustin said breaking the kiss. Her fingers were efficiently undoing his jeans. "Sometimes I think you just like me to use my hot body."

"Shut up," Jennifer replied, kissing him again.

"See my point?" he insisted and she got back only enough to remove her top. Not that he didn't know it already, but she wasn't wearing a bra.

"How do you feel about talking now?"

Dustin shook his head, mouth shut, and shrugged. Jennifer smiled and he leaned in to kiss her, making her giggle as his fingers held her waist.

"Dustin Henderson," she said on his lips. Their eyes were open and he could see the mischief in hers. "Is that your *bed*?"

He just nodded, already mesmerized by her. What a girl he had found. They kissed and stumbled to his bed. He was indeed very lucky, and they had two months of catching up to do.

"Whose stash is this?" Jennifer asked after, when they were laying in

his bed and Dustin decided to roll a joint.

"Grant's," he answered casually.

"Doesn't he get mad?"

Dustin chuckled.

"He gets to get mad when he starts taking care of his plants," he said. "This is my payment."

"Clever," she replied stretching over him to get the lighter. Dustin finished the joint and offered it to her.

Jennifer sat up to lit it up and took a long drag of the joint, and then let out a slow string of smoke. She smiled and looked at Dustin, offering him the joint.

"You know," she said. "In camp, no one had weed like the Henderson weed."

"Oh, so it's not just about my hot body, it's also about my super dope weed that you're with me," Dustin joked and Jennifer looked at him still smiling.

"You figured me out," she said leaning in to kiss him.

Their kiss mixed with smoke and the sweet smell of marijuana and it went on for several minutes – smoke, joke, kiss.

"These drawings," Jennifer said sitting up again and putting on one of Dustin's tees. She reached for one of the papers on the nightstand. "They are Will's, right?"

Dustin pointed at Will's signature at the bottom and she nodded.

"I don't know why he's so obsessed with these things," she said, getting more pictures to look at. "Remember when we saw them during that 8th grade trip?"

No, he didn't remember. Dustin sat up too, frowning, a half smoked joint between his lips.

"What trip?" he asked and she looked at him incredulously.

"Dustin. The museum. You work there. Remember the archeology part, how creepy it was? It had a bunch of things like these," Jen flipped though some drawings as she spoke. "I wonder if they're still there."

She looked at Dustin, who was still frowning. Now he was remembering the visit, it was one of the first things their class did as 8th graders. It was also the first time they saw Max and her brother Billie, who worked there at the time. He gave them the tour around the new exhibition hall of archeology that was, indeed, very creepy and it had no dinosaurs at all, which was very frustrating.

He also remembered something else: that Will wasn't on that trip because he was too sick that day, and he kept complaining about not being able to go see that exhibition everyone was talking about. So either Will fooled everyone, or he really was dreaming about those things he'd been drawing.

There was only one way to know, but –

"I don't know," Dustin said still frowning, the joint now between his fingers. "That hall's been closed for years now."

Odd, to say the least. If Dustin remembered correctly from the files he read when he started working there, that archeology exhibit was one of the most profitable ones Hawkins Museum ever hosted, but what happened to it?

Internally, he smiled. Guess his detective work had just found its starting point.

[...]

Mike Wheeler

It wasn't normal for Mike to get anxious before a Dungeons & Dragons game. He'd been doing that for a very long time, he and his friends had regular meetings every month for a game. He liked to think that he was becoming a bit of a pro DM, and so far this new campaign – after almost three months of not playing at all – was his

most proud work, he had to admit that.

He was nervous. And Lucas kept teasing it was because El would finally participate this time, which was true, but Mike would never admit that. It stunned him how El could sit through a whole day binging *Star Trek*, how she always picked the most complicated books on his shelf, but could never play D&D with them. Storytelling was El's *thing*. Was there any place with more storytelling than his campaigns?

So yes, he was anxious. Even if he didn't need to be. Even if he should be paying attention to what Dustin was telling Nancy – something about an exhibition they saw in 8th grade and Will's drawings. At that moment, all Mike could think of was that he couldn't wait for El and Will to arrive so they could finally start the game.

The door of the basement opened and there they were. Mike caught his breath when he saw El. She looked so healthy and tanned and happy. Her hair was lighter, probably because of the sun, back in a ponytail. She was wearing a cropped top, jeans and boots, and her smile… gosh, her smile could move mountains.

"You look… amazing," he said as a way of hello, and he could swear El blushed. "What have you been doing the past couple of days?"

"Thanks," she replied. "And not much. Playing with the dogs and stuff. Saw my mom."

They were in front of one another and she was so small when she was near him, it made Mike want to protect her. Except that he didn't have the right to want it anymore. He had revoked that right alone.

"Really?" he said interested. "How was it?"

"Nice," she replied with simplicity, in that way that said that she wouldn't give him any detail. El let out an excited sigh, and looked up at him with expectant eyes, open hands as if he was supposed to give her something. "So? Where is it?"

"What?" Mike asked, a little confused. El smiled again.

"The campaign, where is it?" she insisted, and he shook his head to be rid of the confusion.

"Oh, it's here," he pointed at the table in the middle of the basement where the game was set, and when they looked, they realized they were the only people there. "Where the hell is everyone?"

"Upstairs to get food," El informed him, walking towards the table. She stopped beside the chair he usually sat on and pointed at a pile of papers. "Is that it?"

Mike nodded.

"Your charac-what are you doing?" he said when he saw her taking the papers that contained the whole plot of the campaign, the papers that only he was supposed to read. Mike stepped in El's direction. "El! You can't read that!"

"Why not?" she said as she sat on the sofa, eyes focused on the pages, scanning them with attention. "You let me read your other campaigns before."

"Yeah, because you weren't *playing* them!" he protested. He tried to take the papers from her hands, but she just shoved him away with her mind, making him fall on his ass across the room. He *hated* it when she did that. "El, seriously, you're not supposed to read that before the game!"

Instead of listening to him, she just shushed him, which was rather rude, if someone asked his opinion. He tried to get up to make her stop reading, but with a sigh he realized that she was trapping him there, on the floor.

She wanted to read the campaign beforehand? Okay, good. So be it. Mike crossed his arms and closed his mouth, observing her from afar. Part of him was afraid she would lose interest in playing if she knew all the moves, but no. She had asked him to write, she asked for a character. She wouldn't leave him with an empty chair now, clearly.

His concern grew as Mike saw El turn page after page with a deeper frown at each turn. She wasn't liking it. Oh God, she wasn't liking it.

"What the fuck are you doing on the floor?" Lucas asked, coming down the stairs with lemonade and a plate of focaccias in his hands. The other boys were coming down with him, each one carrying something to eat or drink. Mike just gestured towards El.

"Oh, yeah," El said without looking at him, and suddenly the weight was taken from the top of him and he could stand again.

Mike helped the boys organize all the food on the table, unable to focus on their theories about whatever it was they were theorizing, because his attention kept diverting to El.

"This can't be right," she said, almost so low only Mike heard – or maybe he was the only one paying attention to hear. El looked up at him. "Why this monster?"

"Because I wanted something epic and classic," Mike answered, daring to get closer to her. This time, she let him. Part of him almost wished she didn't, because she was looking at him differently, almost in a creepy way.

"You could've chosen *anything*, but you chose this," El said seriously, now catching the attention of the other boys, who were all choosing their seats and looked at them. "I don't understand why."

"I told you, I wanted to make a throwback, but like a reboot. It couldn't be exactly like the other monster."

Seriously, he didn't know why it was so hard for her to understand that. Nor why it bothered her so much, to be honest. It was just a D&D campaign and nothing else.

El got up and handed him the papers, and he was careful not to touch her. Mike frowned at the floor, and it was only when the first step of the stairs creaked that he realized that she was leaving.

"Where are you going?" he asked, making her stop midway and look back again.

"Upstairs," El replied. "Holly and Nancy are watching *Sixteen Candles*."

"But the game is about to start!" Mike protested, maybe louder than

necessary. The boys just exchanged looks. Should he really be surprised that she was ditching them so easily?

"I'm not playing," she said simply, as if it was just insignificant. And maybe it was, but not today. Mike stepped ahead.

"What do you mean, *you're not playing*? I wrote a character for you," he practically begged. At least that was how it felt for him – like begging. For her to stay. Even if he knew she wouldn't. "El, you asked me to write."

El nodded.

"Thank you for that," she said and then she didn't say anything else, just went up the stairs and to the TV room, letting the door close after her. Mike stood there staring at the closed door.

"Well, that was faster than expected," Lucas commented, breaking the moment. "We all lost the bet."

"I think you all should pay *me*," Will reasoned. "Because my bet was closer to reality."

"You said she'd last three hours," Dustin argued. "*She didn't even start*."

"Better than the five hours you bet," Will replied, raising an eyebrow.

Mike still was in the same place, but he was looking at his friends now.

"We need another player," he said. "I'm going to convince her to come play."

"Dude, forget it," Lucas said. "You know she's not coming back. And seriously, I think it's a well-deserved payback for what you did to her." Will chuckled. Of course it would amuse *him*. "Right?"

"We really need another player?" Dustin asked and Mike nodded. "We can call Lexi, she's not working today."

"But this character is *El's*," Mike complained, taking the paper where he had written all the characteristics of the character and shaking it

in front of them. He had left the name for her to pick. "She has to play it!"

"Oh, my God, Mike," Lucas snatched the paper from his hand and reached for the pen he always kept close to keep tabs of the moves. Lucas scratched El's name from the top of the page and wrote Lexi's beside it. "Here, now Lexi can play it. Let's call her."

"I'll do it," Will offered, getting up. Mike was too in shock with the boldness of his friends that afternoon to do anything. "Sit down, Wheeler, you're not growing anymore."

Shock made him compliant and he did as Will said, sitting down in his chair. In his right hand, he still was holding the papers of the campaign and they were a little crumpled, so he set to straighten them.

"Mike," Dustin called very carefully. "Mike, it's just a game."

Mike stopped all his movements except for his eyes, that slowly raised to face the boy in front of him.

"I know it's just a fucking game, Dustin," he said very slowly, feeling the rage boil inside him. "You don't need to tell me *that*."

"Okay, I'm canning this right here," Lucas interfered in his most definitive voice. "First of all, you both know I hate it when I have to be the moderator, so don't you fucking start. Second of all, Mike," he turned to Mike and only spoke again when he looked at him. "You need to chill the fuck out. Right now. Because one, you don't get to be mad at her and two, you worked your ass off to write a great comeback campaign, so let's just *play the goddamn thing in peace*. Understood?"

Lucas looked at Dustin, who looked very peaceful about the whole situation, Mike being the one who snapped in the first place, and then he looked at Mike, which probably made him feel like he needed to emphasize it.

"*Understood*?" he said again, looking right at Mike this time, and the boy sighed.

"Yeah, whatever," he replied, going back to straightening the pages, trying to look less angry while doing it.

"If you start the last bit of drama, Wheeler, I swear to fucking God-"

"Relax, okay?" Mike cut him sharply. "I'll behave."

Both Lucas and Dustin scoffed and Mike couldn't blame them. He didn't have a good track record of playing nice after being annoyed by something, but at that moment, he couldn't focus on them. In his head, he kept playing back to how everyone kept saying that El was paying back his ridiculous behavior which also led his thoughts back to that morning a little over two months ago when they had that one decisive fight – it was especially hard to shake the image of clarity and heartbreak in her eyes when his words hit her.

He had been so stupid, Mike knew that. But that was water under the bridge already, and he had to let go – he *had* to, or he'd go crazy.

It had been easier without El around. Things with Spencer… they seemed to be good, walking towards a productive direction. Mike struggled to understand how so many beautiful girls managed to like him – first El and then Hilston, then El again, and now Spencer – but it wasn't as if he would complain. As Will liked to say, he'd better enjoy it, right?

Mike was so deep in his own thoughts that he didn't even realize how much time had passed. It was only when Lexi touched his shoulder to greet him that he came back to reality. He forced a smile to her and Lucas handed her the character when she sat by his side, he and Dustin giving her the quick explanation of how the game was played and what she should do.

"Okay, I think I got it," Lexi said, eyes on the list of characteristics of her character. She already was showing a level of concentration that El never did, but that was something Mike would never admit. "Are we good to go?"

"I think we are," Dustin said at the same time Lucas nodded excitedly and offered his fist for a fist bump with her.

"No, we're not," Mike said making them stop midway as he realized. "*Where the fuck is Will?*"

Between annoyed *'Oh my God's* and *'for fuck sake's*, Mike got up again and strutted upstairs to go look for Will, already forming in his head a big argument he would have with the boy.

He didn't have to go far, though. Will was in the TV room with the girls, "watching the movie." Except that he was more talking to Holly, who was pressed between him and El on the sofa, than anything else. From the door of the basement, Mike watched Will shake hands with his little sister as if sealing a deal, and then they both reached for the plate of Jonathan's biscuits on El's lap. Nancy had spent the whole morning trying to bake them.

"I like this part when her father apologizes for forgetting her birthday," El commented.

"And it's funny after, when the mother apologizes and then the brother is a total jerk," Will added and they all laughed. Mike couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Will," he called, catching everyone's attention. "The game?"

"Is Lexi here?"

"Uh, yes! Come on, man, we don't have all day."

"Alright, damn," Will complained, getting up. Mike crossed his arms, waiting. "Don't forget to pass me all the details, Hol."

"I won't," Holly guaranteed, mouth full of biscuits.

Will headed to the basement, but slowed down as he passed by Mike to go downstairs.

"Did you ever, in your life, have a day without stressing out?" he questioned with that legit tone that he grew to learn and that pissed Mike off more each time Will used it. "It's not rhetorical, I'm really asking."

"Fuck off," Mike replied rolling his eyes, trying not to get even more

annoyed about Will's crooked know-it-all smile.

His eyes stopped on El and for the first time he noticed that she was wearing the ring he had sent to her after a lot of convincing on Nancy's part. That was unexpected. Part of Mike expected for El to hate him, and maybe he would've dealt better if it had been that way. It would be easier to justify his own anger.

Mike held on to the door handle, ready to go back to the basement, knowing that he should leave her alone. A voice in his head had to keep trying to remind him that he had caused it all, that he was the one to blame, but this whole campaign thing was just *so stupid*, and she had confirmed through a call once when he picked up the phone before Nance that yes, she wanted him to write it and now-

"Why did you do that?" Mike caught himself asking. El was looking at him with her doe eyes that were both intense and scary and she didn't say anything, she just let him rant. "Why would you let me take time from all the other things I was supposed to do and have this stupid *hope* that you were finally into something I like just to snatch it away in the first opportunity? Huh?"

"Taking time from other things was your choice," El said evenly, which enraged him more. Mike held the handle tighter.

"Is it bad? Is that why you won't play? You didn't like my writing?" He didn't give her space to answer. "Or are you just really fucking desperate to hurt my feelings, El? At least that's what everyone says. At least it's what makes sense."

El was quietly looking at him. She wasn't much of a speaker, never been, but it was him and her and they were different. Usually, she was the one asking the questions. Usually, she was much calmer too, with a little crinkle between her eyebrows to emphasize her confusion. Mike wasn't confused, he was frustrated. And that was a lot worse.

"I'm sorry," El said. The way she said it let him know that she shouldn't be the one apologizing.

Mike couldn't take that. He turned around and closed the door behind

him, just to face a very angry Will instead.

He didn't know what he expected would happen after El came back. No, correction, he did know. He expected her to run right into his arms and say that it was alright. He expected to hold her and say that he was sorry. But instead, she hugged Lucas and talked to Dustin, and to him she only offered half-information and silence. And she was never, ever silent with him.

"Shut up," he said to Will, passing by him and going to his seat. A little after, Will joined him and *finally* they could start their game. "Before anything else, each one of you roll the dice," he instructed, and even though that wasn't very conventional, they all did as he said.

As soon as the game started, however, Mike's mind cleared. He was in his lane with the fantasy and the epic storytelling, and within half an hour, something inside him settled. His story was good, his writing was interesting. He shouldn't second guess it because of anyone's opinion, as long as he kept doing it, and kept working hard to get better.

Half an hour became a full hour and one hour became four really fast. Before he expected, their small crew was starting to face the main monster they would have to destroy in order to get in the dungeon to collect their prize.

"The tunnel is dark and humid, and the only way you can go through is sticking together."

"Can I use the witch stones for light?" asked Dustin and Mike nodded. It was a low number, easy to get when he rolled the dice. With the number Dustin got, he could use about five stones.

"Each step could be a trap, so you try to be as careful and silent as possible," Mike continued. "Who knows what could be waiting for you. The first bifurcation is easy to choose. All you have to do is remember the prophecy."

"For the right path is the only one that can lead you to glory?" Lexi recited from heart. She was doing a surprisingly good job as the

brave princess. "I thought we agreed that the prophecy didn't make sense."

"Of course it does, Lexi!" Lucas said excitedly. "At least part of it now! We follow to the right."

"That's correct," Mike said nodding. Too bad their joy would be short. "Except that you are all so thrilled to start figuring out the prophecy and getting closer to the prize that you don't realize that one of you is quietly taken from under your noses."

"Who?" asked Lucas frowning.

Mike didn't answer, but just kept narrating the story, pulling booby traps and small prizes here and there, if they got the right numbers on the dices, guiding them through the maze-like tunnel that would lead them to the dungeon – and the monster that was his most proud work.

"This is it, right?" Dustin asked. "The entry of the dungeon. Where is it?"

"Exactly," Mike said. "Where *is* it?" he smiled looking at each one of the players in front of him. Will had been quiet the past hour, which was very convenient considering what was to come. "The witch stone in your hand runs out of power and you're all covered in darkness again. Darkness brings along silence, and you all struggle to come up with a plan."

"There's got to be a witch stone that still works," Lexi suggested, so Dustin rolled the dice and looked at Mike.

"The stones together produce a dim light, and you now can start looking around to find the entrance of the dungeon, careful and silently, unsure of when they will run out of light again. It's a small room, and the sound of breathing makes it seem that there are twice as many people there."

"Why can't Will recharge the stones?" asked Lucas.

"There's no answer from Will, the wise," Mike said. "And too late you realize that he's not there. For a second, it's like you are running out

of light again, but in fact it's a shadow growing in front of you, a shadow of something that you don't recognize, something that seems to grow larger and taller at each second, taking up all the space in the small room at the end of the tunnel."

"Where's my sword?" Lucas asked and hurried to roll the dices, getting such a high number that he celebrated. The score meant that he could conjure special gadgets for the sword that could be really helpful. "I cast emerald lance."

"You are all blinded for a second when the green light of the sword illuminates the room, but when you can focus again…"

"Shit, it's a Beholder, isn't it?" Dustin groaned. Mike smiled. It could be, certainly, but he had better plans for this evening.

"…you see that the monster is holding Will hostage, its arms so tightly around the wise that he's almost losing consciousness."

"It's not a Beholder, they don't hold their prey hostage," Lucas argued.

"How did you choose who would be taken?" Lexi wondered.

"The first dice roll," Will said quietly and Mike nodded. "I got a four, the lowest number."

"It's a Mind Flayer," Lucas continued and Dustin shook his head.

"Like shit it is!"

They could go on forever, Mike knew, and Lexi was looking right at him knowing that the only way they could move forward was with Mike's next information. Will, however, was staring at the table and the avatars on the board.

Well, it was about time they knew what monster they would be facing.

Mike got the monster's avatar from his pocket and put it in the middle of the board.

"The Thessalmonster!" he announced making many eyes widen and

then getting a bunch of protests.

"What the heck, Thessalmonsters are not that smart!" Lucas said taking the dices, but Mike stopped him before he made the move.

"A Thessalmonster is as smart as its heads, and this is no average thessal," he explained. "Built in a very specific magic, each head with its own special power, and its only goal is to protect the entry of the dungeon at any cost. And there's more. You can either get Will back or fight your way through. If he wants to break free, he'll need to do this alone."

They all looked at Will. It was very convenient that he was the one taken by the monster, because this monster wasn't affected by magic, and so his main trait was useless. Now, he had to get a really high score in order to break free, or even a considerate amount to have a chance of fighting. Mike couldn't wait to see what he would come up with.

Except that Will didn't move. He didn't even take his eyes from the board and he was breathing shallowly, almost as if he was having a… panic attack? But why?

"Will?" Mike called. Nothing. He tried again. "*Will!*"

Startled, Will looked at him.

"Your move," he encouraged and the other boy shook his head.

"I can't," he said weakly. "I can't face a Thessalmonster."

"Well, you can at least try," Dustin argued. "At least until we get rid of enough heads to help you."

Still, Will kept shaking his head.

"No," he said and covered his eyes with his hands, drawing in a sharp breath. Mike frowned. Was Will getting sick again?

"Will, are you alright?" Lexi asked worried, touching his arm lovingly.

"I, uh," Will started to say, dropping his hands.

The door on top of the stairs opened and El came down quick and steady.

"We're going home," she said firmly, walking towards Will and taking his hand. He didn't even protest.

"We're halfway through the game," Mike said, though his voice was really low.

"You've been playing for over five hours," El argued, looking right at him. "Will is sick. You can continue another day."

Mike looked at Will again, saw how he was holding on to El and how she kept him steady. That was something he had seen before, but the other way around. Funny how things changed.

"I don't mind coming back another day," Lexi said quietly. Dustin and Lucas nodded. "Maybe next weekend, after we kick everyone's ass at the class tournament again," she suggested.

Mike knew it was unreasonable to continue that game now, not with one of them not feeling well. Besides, the day already was feeling awfully long. So he nodded, agreeing with the decision.

"Everyone agree with next weekend?" he asked fidgeting with his pen ready to add some last minute notes so he wouldn't forget exactly what was going on for the next half of the game, and they all nodded.

"Works for me," Dustin agreed, settling it.

"Next weekend it is, then," Mike said, and as soon as the words were out of his mouth, El dragged Will out of there. He knew it was because she wanted to take Will home, where their parents were and where they could take care of him the way they did best, but it still kind of hurt, as if she was desperate to get away from him as fast as possible.

The rest of the guys left too, Dustin and Lexi together, since they were neighbors, and after helping Mike take everything upstairs and with the dishes, Lucas went too. At this point, Mike's frustration had become a silent one, and he much rather chew on a piece of chicken pie his mom had made for dinner.

Truth was, he had to calm down. And there was no calming down when El was around, so he had to keep distracting himself with something, anything. *Anyone*, maybe.

Mike dropped the half-eaten piece of pie on his plate and went back to the basement, where his Moleskine was. He flipped the pages to the end where the phone number he was looking for was written in Spencer's neat handwriting. His first moment of luck in the day happened when he picked up the phone and Nancy wasn't on the line.

"Hello?" That was the second lucky moment. Spencer picked up the call.

"Penny?" Mike replied. "It's Mike."

For a second, she didn't say anything, but Spencer was a hell of a talker. She was a pro at filling silences, and she wouldn't fail him this time.

"Mike Wheeler," she said. She sounded a little different on the phone, but recognizable all the same. "Didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"Yeah, I was thinking here…" he checked the calendar. "If you have plans for Labor Day."

Spencer chuckled.

"Couldn't you wait to ask me that tomorrow at work?" she asked. Well, of course he could, but he needed to think of anything but El *right now*, so he called. Penny was easily his best choice.

"Didn't want to," Mike replied, and he wanted to believe that on the other side, all the way in Indianapolis, Spencer was smiling.

"I usually go to the park with my parents, but I don't have any specific plan yet, why?" Penny said. *Why* was a really good question. Mike didn't have plans either; he didn't even have a plan for that call, which was a first – he was known for knowing what to do. Dustin even used to call him Top Cat when they were kids. Right now, he would have to improvise.

"Have you ever visited Hawkins' National reserve?" he suggested.

Labor Day was also Nancy's last day at home and she would have to go back to college the following morning. Jonathan would take her as far as New York City, and from there she'd take a bus to Portland. That day, after they went to the reserve and after having ice cream downtown, Nancy looked distracted, so Mike decided to help her finish packing.

"You letting your hair grow again?" Nancy asked, barely looking up from the bag she was organizing. Mike shrugged.

"I guess," he said. "Maybe I'll have a mullet, what do you think?"

Nancy looked up at him with wide eyes and he laughed.

"I'm joking," Mike guaranteed. "Mom and Dad are paying for my driving lessons," he commented, folding shirts and tops the best he could according to his sister's instructions. "Did you know?"

Nancy nodded.

"Dad almost made me pay for mine, remember?" she said, and Mike nodded, trying not to laugh. "Because I would start a little after he found out about me and Steve."

"*If you're old enough to have a boyfriend, you're old enough to pay for your own classes*," Mike mimicked and Nancy laughed.

"Did he say anything like that to you?" she asked and he shook his head no. "See what I mean about double standards?"

"I know, Nance, believe me."

"So," Nancy said casually unfolding a shirt he had just put in front of her and folding it again. "Is there a reason you suddenly put me in your date plans today?"

Mike tried not to sigh. He *knew it*, that if he left enough space she would ask him that, and that was the last thing he wanted to explain.

"You said you didn't have plans," he answered vaguely. Nancy stared

at him, eyebrow raised. Mike said nothing else.

"My theory," Nancy dared to say. "Is that you got cold feet. You saw this beautiful girl who's been *clearly* falling in love with you and you started to doubt if it was a good idea because *you're still in love with El*."

Mike scoffed, trying to make her theory sound absurd.

"Not even close," he replied, but she wasn't done.

"So you panicked and you needed an easy way out, and that would be to make it look the least like a date as possible. That's why you turned to your good, amazing older sis for help, but I have news for you, little brother."

"Are you going to tell me that I have no right to still like El and that I better start 'seizing the day' or I'll go crazy? Because I've heard that a thousand times already."

Nancy smiled.

"Not exactly, actually," she said. "I mean, more or less. What I'm going to say is, you gotta move on! Breaking up was your idea in the first place and you deserve to enjoy it."

"Do I?"

"Mike," Nancy said, relaxing her shoulders. "Of course you do. When you gave that option to El, did you even consider you were giving it to yourself too?"

He had no answer for her. Fact was, he didn't give it a thought, too afraid to drown in *what ifs*. Him breaking up with El, it was so sudden and abrupt. Mike told El that she only knew how to live around him, but if the past two months were of any proof, he was the one who couldn't live without her.

When did he become so pathetic?

"Is that why you were so mean to El last week?" Nancy asked. "Because you don't know what to do?"

Mike sighed.

"I don't know, Nance," he replied sitting on Nancy's bed. "I guess it was a bunch of things. Work is pissing me off."

"I told you already you should quit. No car is worth the effort."

"And this whole thing with the cocoons and the DOE is really weird," he continued. "Plus, you gotta admit that the way El ditched the game was really fucked up."

Nancy sat down the bed as well and smiled, looking at him with soft eyes.

"Did it occur to you that she might have asked you to write for another reason than to play the game?" she commented and Mike frowned.

"Do you know something I don't?" he asked looking right in her eyes. Nancy shook her head. "Did she tell you something?"

"No," Nancy said softly. "I don't know, Mike, I'm just speculating. But I guess that's something you should think about – a little less about *your* reasons to write the campaign, a little more about hers." She reached for her nightstand's drawer and took his *Dungeon Master Monsters Guide* out, handed it to him. "This is yours."

"Like the reading?" he asked, taking the ratty book he had bought from a garage sale ages ago. Nancy's smile widened.

"I actually did!" she replied. "The whole points system was a big miss, but the monsters are neat. Some more than others, but it's cool. I never dug so deep in D&D facts, all I've ever done was to help edit campaigns."

Mike flipped some pages of the book, always enchanted by the colorful drawings. Nancy had raised a valid point though; he didn't for a moment think of El's reasons to ask him to write. And he wouldn't have time to think it over now, because Holly interrupted them by coming in with her blanket, climbing up the bed and getting comfy between her older siblings.

"Can I sleep with you tonight, Nance?" Hol asked using her adorable baby voice that melted everyone. Mike and Nancy exchanged a look and smiled at the same time.

"Of course, Fozzie, why not?" Nancy told Holly, bopping her small nose with her index finger. "It'll be girls' night in here tonight."

Holly's eyes shone and she opened the biggest smile, and then they both looked at Mike. It took him a moment, and then he got it.

"Oh, right!" he said, getting up, his book in his hand. "Girls' night, got it."

He had to get mentally ready for school coming back anyway, because it could be a hell of a long week with the whole sports thing. Mike walked to his bedroom, closing the door behind him but opening the window right after. It was another hot night, so he took off his shirt, opting to go to sleep only with his pajama bottoms. He changed the time of his alarm and sighed. Two less hours of sleep for the next many months, and a part-time job that he barely tolerated, he was in for a *great* year, wasn't he?

Mike got his Moleskine and the Monsters Guide that he had dropped on his bed and sat down after turning on his bedside lamp. By now, he already had gotten used to his new bedroom, the bed was twice as big as the previous one, he had put up posters of movies, guitarists and books on his walls, and his guitar was hanging between his bed and the door. He realized that it'd been a while since he practiced some music, being so immersed in writing lately. He made a mental note to play some this week, just to dust off the cobwebs.

Turning to his Moleskine again, first Mike checked the notes on the moves from last Thursday's game, thinking about how they would affect the rest of the plot. He got a pencil and kept flipping back to the end of the notepad to write down some reminders until he reached the point the game had stopped – when the monster was revealed.

Mike stopped. The monster's reveal had also been where El had stopped reading and started to ask weird questions, it was when Will got quiet. Why was it important? He got the Monsters Guide again

and flipped to the page about the Thessals, where there was a small note about the original Thessalmonster created by a Lich, about how instable it was, and that was why it didn't last nor reproduce. It was strong and deadly, but a unique monster with very specific ways to kill it. He didn't think it should ring any bells.

Time passed and Mike didn't even realize when he fell asleep. The only thing he knew was that one moment he was looking for more info on the Thessalmonster – he couldn't find details anywhere – and the next he was being jolted awake by his alarm, which he turned off with an annoyed and considerably strong punch. Sighing, Mike rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands to shake off the sleep and sat up, finding that he had slept on top of some of his DM books, his bedside lamp still on.

He got ready on the automatic, but fast, and then went to get Holly in Nancy's room. By the time he woke up, he knew that Nancy had already left, so Holly was alone in the bedroom sleeping right in the middle of the bed. Mike shook her lightly.

"Fozzie," he called sitting on the bed. "Time to get ready, it's your first day of school."

Holly groaned and pretended to be sleeping, which made him smile.

"Come on, Holly, I thought you liked kindergarten," Mike argued, tickling his little sister and making her laugh. "Didn't you even separate your clothes already? Huh?"

"Stop it, Mikey," Holly said between giggles trying to push away his hands and he stopped, letting her breathe. "It's so early, and Nancy left."

"I know," he nodded. "And you knew she would leave, she had to." Holly nodded, wiping away the tears of laughter from the corner of her eyes.

"She left you a note," she said pointing at the nightstand, and Mike saw an envelope with his name on it.

"You awake yet?" he asked turning to his little sister again and she

nodded and crawled to his lap, small, bony arms around his neck. Her hair was a mess.

"Do you remember your first day of school, Mike?" Holly asked, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. Mike rubbed her back and got up, leaving the envelope for later.

"I do," he said taking her to the common bathroom. The smell of eggs and bacon filled the house. "I remember being a bit jealous of Lucas, because he had another friend, but it didn't last much."

"Why not?"

"Because," Mike put Holly down as he answered her. "She found new friends in the first week and I had Lucas just for me for the next year until Will came back."

"I thought Will was always your friend," she questioned frowning.

"We were," he said getting a hairbrush to brush her hair while she brushed her teeth. "But the Byers moved out for a couple of years when we were little. It was a job thing, I think, that didn't work out, so Ms. Murphy came back with her sons."

"Zu ink au wee vine?" Holly asked with the toothbrush in her mouth.

"You'll have to spit before you speak, Fozzie," Mike instructed, even though Hol knew that very well. She did as he told her.

"You think I'll be fine?"

Mike scoffed.

"Are you kidding me? You'll nail it!" he guaranteed. "And if you ever feel like you're not nailing it, you just tell me, okay?"

Holly nodded and went back to brushing her teeth. That had been something that Nancy had told him so many years ago too, that she would always be there for him when he needed, that she could always help him. He hoped he and Holly wouldn't have a moment of falling apart like he and Nancy had for a while.

Mike finished brushing Holly's hair and let her out the bathroom to go get her clothes. His mom already had conferred her backpack, so his only job was to make sure that Hol would be ready in time. While he waited for her to change, he got his own backpack and then the envelope Nancy had left for him. He didn't read it right away, instead he put it in the middle of his Moleskine for later. If tradition followed, he would have a lot of time on the bench that afternoon to see what she had left behind for him.

He took Holly on his bike to Hawkins Elementary and then went to school where, as he expected, tradition followed. Not even with last year's accident did the council think that maybe it would be a bad idea to put older teens competing with younger teens in such intense sports. Even worse, now not only did the seniors want to take the title from Mike's grade, the freshmen thought they had a chance of winning and that fired up most of the sophomore students.

"I say we'll have our asses handed to us in two days," Will bet during the meeting in the auditorium. Mike was sitting between him and Dustin, all shrunken in order not to be seen.

"You're being optimistic," he said.

"We just have to pray they don't put football first this year," Dustin commented leaning closer to Mike so Will would hear him too. It wasn't necessary. Dustin was loud even when he was trying not to be. "Then we can find a way to be on the bench for the rest of the week."

Lucas shook his head.

"You guys shame me," he said with displeasure.

"Just because you can shoot some three shots it doesn't mean you'll survive football, Lucas," Mike argued.

His much valid point was interrupted by the end of the meeting and it was time for class. With the new school year, they also had new subjects and now everyone was splitting up for real. The only subject Mike had with all of his friends was English II. He and Will were together in AP Latin, and he would have trig with Dustin and chemistry with Lucas.

The surprise came in third period, though, when he found El in his creative writing class. By then, Mike already had time to read Nancy's note, so he took a deep breath and tried not to be stupid.

"I thought you hated English," Mike said when El approached and sat in the chair by his right. She shrugged.

"It was Jon's idea," El answered. "He said that maybe I'll feel better about it if I take writing, since I like to read so much. And then maybe the main subject won't be such a torture. "

Mike weighted it internally.

"It's a plan," he said. El smiled.

"It is."

He smiled too and she looked ahead. It took a lot of convincing in his head to take his eyes from her and look at the teacher too. For the first time since El came back from camp they had a civilized, if short, conversation and that was progress, right?

The first game that afternoon was mixed lacrosse that Mike and the boys managed to stay out of, but when they sat down to watch the girls' soccer game, Lucas and Dustin had some news.

"Did you hear about Spanish II?" Lucas asked trying to sound casual. All Mike knew was that they were having that subject with El this year.

"No," Mike replied. "Should I?"

"Well," Lucas breathed, as if whatever it was that had happened in class was a heavy burden to carry. "I kinda feel like I have to tell you."

"You don't *have* to tell him anything," Dustin corrected and then shrugged. "But yeah."

"When are you two ever in synch?" Mike asked suspiciously. They exchanged a look before Lucas spoke again.

"First exercise teacher gave us was to talk about three interesting things that happened this summer and El, well," he hesitated, forcing Mike to take his eyes from the field where the girls from his year and the juniors were warming up to look at him. "She mentioned three things: how she's single after you two broke up, the hockey camp and that she kissed two people there."

Mike was silent. In part it was shock, in part it was because he didn't know how he should react to that.

"She said that?" he asked instead. Lucas and Dustin nodded.

"Her Spanish is really good," Dustin commented. "I don't know how."

"I heard the Chief saying something about her cognitive system being highly developed in the labs," Lucas replied and Mike rolled his eyes.

"You didn't bother to come here to talk to me about *that*," he said, trying to bring them back on track. "Is there something specific that I should care about?"

"Oh yeah," Dustin said. "First, notice how she said '*people*', instead of '*guys*'? At first we thought, *did Will really have that much influence on her and this bisexual thing is contagious?* But then we asked and she said it was a truth or dare situation where she was dared to kiss the prettiest person of the camp and apparently she kissed her bunk counselor, *"because she was obviously the prettiest person she'd ever seen in her life"*."

"That's unsurprising," Mike said shrugging. One of the things El hadn't shaken off was the literal way of taking some phrases.

"Yeah, but what really matters," Lucas said, glancing at Dustin as if he had started with the wrong part. "Is that when she said she was single, there were like three or four guys who immediately sat straighter, clearly interested. And since you're having cold feet with Spencer, we thought you should be aware that you'll have competition."

"Competition?" Mike echoed frowning.

"Look, we know you're El's favorite, but you fucked up," Dustin

continued. "And she did exactly what you told her to do, she went sailing. And now that the news of your break up is out, there will be a bunch of sailors after her."

Mike shook his head. He was ready to tell his friends that they shouldn't be worrying about him and El, because they were friends now, and it was good that she was finding her own voice and doing what she wanted – even if it pained him a little, if he was to be honest. He liked being the one she turned to, but some things were just not meant to be.

Involuntarily, his eyes looked for El on the field. She was benched, but she was learning how to do some freestyle soccer with-

"Like Patrick?" he asked, signaling to the border of the field. Dustin and Lucas nodded.

"He's in our class, yes," Lucas answered. "He's certainly investing quickly."

He also was a P. Patrick was a senior and Phyllis's cousin, and every now and then he was seen with his cousin's group of mean girls, but Mike didn't say anything about it. El didn't need a hero, never did. She would know if something was wrong.

Mike hummed.

"Good for her," he said. He was surprised with the coldness of his tone, as if it wasn't affecting him at all. It was. But he wouldn't let it show. "And by the way? I'm not having cold feet with Spencer, why's everyone saying that?"

Dustin looked at him with a humorless smile.

"Didn't you invite your sister to crash your date?" he asked and Mike sighed. "You better stop being a pussy and kiss the girl already, Mike, we're getting bored."

"Shut up," Mike replied. Mature, clearly. But also true, that's why he was shutting off. He needed to make it up to Penny if he really believed it was worth it – which he believed was. She was awesome. Very different from him, but awesome all the same. All he had to do

was stop beating himself up, like Nancy had said in her note.

Today, he thought, today he would invite Spencer out again, and this time he wouldn't chicken out. He put himself out there, he could face it.

When the school day was over and they got out of the showers, finally allowed to leave, Mike still had ahead of him a few hours of work. He was leaving the school listening to Will laugh about El understanding *that kind* of baseball jokes, but as soon as he stepped out to get his bike, he was surprised to see Penny's Mercedes there, with the girl leaning against the car checking her beeper.

"Spencer?" Mike called frowning, and she looked at him and smiled. He left his bike there, the rest of the guys waited for Will, Jenny and El to put on their skates. "Lost?"

"No…" she replied blushing and standing straighter. "I thought you might like a ride."

Mike raised an eyebrow and looked back at his bike, and then looked at Spencer again. She stepped closer.

"Tempting," he said. "But I have my bike today."

"We can put it in the car," she suggested. "It fits."

He looked at her sportive model and raised an eyebrow.

"You think?"

"No," Spencer replied and chuckled. She was really close. When did that happen? Not that he was complaining.

"You came here to offer me a ride to work," Mike revised just to make sure.

"And to thank you for yesterday," she said.

"Oh," he said. "You're welcome."

Oh, God, how lame.

"Also because I forgot something," Penny said and reached to touch his cheek with light fingers.

Spencer traced the curve of his cheekbone down to his jaw and then touched his lower lip. The whole time, Mike was looking at her brown eyes and he saw her bite her lip and sigh – that was the *what the hell* moment for him. Screw everything, Nancy was right. He deserved nice things, even if he had fucked up, even if he had been an asshole. He had a chance to start over and he would.

So he leaned over, and Penny met him halfway, and at last he was kissing her, his first step actually moving on.

It felt like finally.

"What are you doing Friday?" Mike asked when they broke apart and she shrugged.

"Homecoming."

He hummed.

"In your school or in mine?" Mike suggested making Penny smile.

"Are you asking me out, Mike Wheeler?"

"For real this time," he said. Spencer nodded.

"What about yours?" she looked over his shoulder. "Looks charming."

He chuckled.

"Of course it does."

Mike accepted that ride she offered, and with Spencer around the week even seemed to be less awful. He actually enjoyed playing table tennis, gladly covered for Will in baseball – even though he didn't hit one single ball – and it didn't feel weird to sit by El's side every day in third period. Sophomores got first prize again and they won tickets for the football game against the San Diego Chargers at the end of November, as well as the discount in the school's shop again for the rest of the semester.

And to close the week with a golden key, for the first time in his life, Mike went to the Homecoming dance.

"Last year," he was telling Spencer as they crossed the gym doors. "We didn't feel like coming at all, we were going to the movies instead. But then El broke her leg and we ended up doing nothing."

There were no cheesy decorations in the gym for Homecoming, as he came to know, just a photo booth and a table with drinks and nachos. No band, just a DJ with big amps blasting Poison's biggest hit.

"What's that song?" Spencer asked over the loud music.

"Remember that time Will came talking non-stop about an album he had just listened to? David Bowie and Bon Jovi's ironically dark sided baby?"

She thought for a moment, trying to remember.

"Poison?" Mike nodded. She laughed. "I see what he means now."

"Oh, you haven't seen nothing yet!" he guaranteed. He had to admit that he pretty much enjoyed the band, even though it wasn't what he would normally listen to.

"You're really good friends with Will and Elle, aren't you?" she asked holding on to his shoulder to stay closer. Mike had his arm around her waist. She was wearing a beautiful black shoulder to shoulder dress that was almost too much for Hawkins, but that wasn't a problem at all for him.

"Will is my best friend," he answered.

"And Elle isn't?"

He sighed.

"Yes and no," Mike told her. "It's complicated."

He had no idea if Spencer knew about him and El, and he didn't feel like telling her, not that night. He could have some time just to enjoy being with her without any ghosts, that wasn't much to ask.

"I heard your friends calling them twins. Are they really?"

Mike chuckled.

"Well," he answered. "They are both really weird with similar brown hair, but besides that, and besides their annoying attractiveness, no. They're actually over a month apart. But it doesn't even matter, their parents are together now, so…" Mike shrugged.

"Siblings anyway?" Spencer added and he nodded. "I think I saw Will already," she said sliding her hand down his arm and holding his hand. They walked to the dance floor.

"He said he'd come early with Dustin and Lexi, something about helping with announcements."

A slow song started to play and the dancing crowd started to divide into pairs. Only then Mike saw her, El, across the gym, and she left him speechless. Her hair was back in a loose braid filled with small baby's-breath; she was wearing a colorful knee-high dress with her back exposed. It was different from everything he'd ever seen her wear, a dress in shades of yellow and orange, light pink high heels on her feet.

"Wow! It's like she's wearing autumn," Spencer commented, catching Mike's attention.

He guessed that was a way to put it, in his head the words started to quickly get together in that poetic way they dared to form whenever he was with El, but he wasn't with her now, he was with Spencer. So he shook his head lightly and turned to the girl by his side, taking in how beautiful she looked.

"Wanna dance?" Mike asked and Penny smiled.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said taking his hand and following him to the dance floor. George Michael was playing, the song about dancing that everyone sang along to at their 8th grade winter formal. "I love this song," Penny told him. Everyone did, but he didn't tell her that. He just danced with her.

[...]

Elle Hopper

Because Will had to go get the instructions with Mr. Fresno and Lexi was helping with the beverages, El was alone near the bleachers. The DJ was playing a bunch of slow songs now and Patrick didn't try to approach yet, even though he'd spent the week trying to convince her to go to the dance so they could dance together or something.

El didn't really mind. She still wasn't sure about Pat's reasons to go after her and besides, she just wanted to relax. It was the first time she wore that dress she had bought in Illinois with Jennifer, and she liked the way Lexi had braided her hair with flowers and added glitter on her face.

Everything stopped when she looked over to the dance floor and found Mike. It was like she would always automatically look for him in crowds and for a long time she thought that he would be the only one. But he was dancing with someone else, the beautiful blonde that Will told her was called Spencer and worked with him.

She looked happy in his arms, and Mike looked so handsome. El's vision blurred when they kissed, but for a long moment she couldn't look away; with her thumb, she fidgeted with the ring on her finger, feeling her heart tighten.

"Ellie?" Lexi called, appearing by her side with two cups of punch. "You okay?"

El took a deep breath and quickly dried the tears that were threatening to fall from the corner of her eyes with her fingertips.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she lied. "This song is kinda sad."

Lexi looked at her in silence and then back at the dance floor. Of course she knew why El was upset. Lexi could be annoying sometimes with her hardcore tendency to talk too much, but she was perceptive and smart, and she was one hell of a good friend.

"Here, drink some," she offered a cup to El who just shook her head no. "There's no alcohol."

"It's not that," El assured and looked at the door. "I just… uh…"

She didn't know how to put it in words, and she knew that she wasn't supposed to just drop everything like that and leave, but that was exactly what she would do now.

"Ellie!" Lexi still called, but there wasn't stopping El, not even if she really tried.

El went all the way to the back of the gym and then to the door, so she wouldn't have to cross the dance floor, and she was almost crossing the street when Will caught up with her, gently grabbing her elbow and making her stop.

"El, where are you going?" he asked trying to catch his breath.

"Home."

"*Why?*" he asked and she looked at him with the favorite expression she learned to make – *Really?* "El, don't do that."

"I'm not doing anything, I just want to go home," she argued. Will let go of her elbow.

"Do you, really?" he challenged, and she looked down at her hands, feeling the stupid tears gather up again.

"Yes."

"Care to elaborate why?"

She didn't say anything at first, just passed her fingertip on the stones of her ring. It was hard to put it in words. She thought she would be fine, she had been while she was away. But it was so hard when she was so close to him.

"First time he kissed me, it was because of a school dance," El finally said, not looking at her brother. "And when we really got together, it was a school dance. He rapped to me for the first time at a school dance, making up the lyrics on the spot."

"Mike *rapped*?" Will asked, surprised. El looked at him.

"Now, he's dancing and kissing someone else. At a school dance."

"Oh, sis," Will sighed, wiping away a tear that fell on her cheek with his thumb. "Don't cry because of him, he's an idiot."

"And so am I," El replied taking off the ring. "This is stupid."

Will shrugged.

"It is," he agreed. "You know what I think, he doesn't deserve your tears. But more important, you don't deserve to suffer. You deserve to have fun and find things and people that you like, you deserve to enjoy, Ellie. Like you did back in camp."

El swallowed a small sob and a couple more tears fell on her cheeks. She was so angry for having so many feelings, and such contradictory ones! She knew that Will was right and she wasn't supposed to feel so desperately helpless, but the whole situation with her and Mike was ridiculous.

"This is bullshit," she said, and in a sudden decision, she threw the ring away.

"No!" Will exclaimed, reaching for it. The object stopped mid-fall and slowly made its way back to his hand. "Don't do anything you'll regret, I know you loved this ring."

"Will," El started and he closed his hand keeping the ring safe.

"I'll hold on to it for a while, okay?" he said. "Until you decide that it doesn't hurt anymore. But you can't go home right now, you have to go back to the dance. Look, it was supposed to be a secret, but you got the MVP title this year, and you need to go get your certificate."

"I did?" she asked, smiling a little.

"Of course you did, you were great!" Will exclaimed. "See, it's a good evening, you're smiling. Also, didn't Patrick Curry promise you a dance?"

El sighed.

"He's a P, Will," she argued.

"A really cute one," he replied right away, making her giggle. "Besides, you can totally break his neck if he tries to do anything you wouldn't be up to, or if he tries to embarrass you or whatever it is the Ps could be planning."

"I can?" she asked. Will smiled.

"You *could*," he corrected. "But you know what I mean, right?" El nodded. Will put the ring in his pocket and then hugged her, kissing her forehead. "You already had a lot of suffering in your life, sis, it's time to enjoy life without worry."

"Okay," El said, her voice soft.

They heard someone approaching, so she looked over Will's shoulder and saw Lexi a few feet from them, her handbag ready and a small transparent tube in her hand. El signaled to Will and he turned around, saw Lexi too. The petite girl raised her bag and make up.

"I thought you might need some more glitter," she offered and El smiled. She was lucky, and she would be fine.

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a/n: I'm sorry. I was listening to Bruno Mars' 'When I was your man' on repeat while writing this last scene.

For El's make up, think Drew Barrymore in 'Ever After: A Cinderella Story'. For her dress, loosely inspired by this bit. ly/ 2jRncl6 (remove space) but short and with her back exposed; and for her hair, something like this: bit. ly/ 2kOqeZ1 (remove spaces).

7. the domino effect

Author's note: So I wanted to post on Millie's birthday, because, well, it's Millie's birthday (and also David Mazouz's and Martha's, but shhh), but for that to happen I had to operate a miracle - as we like to say here in my little land - and so did my beta, and okay, the 19th is already over in Brazil, but you have to understand that I simply HAD to watch that episode of Big Little Lies, that's how it works in the rare times that an episode is exhibited in your country at the same time as it is in its original country. ANYWAY.

I also had to adapt some of what was already planned for this chapter, but I'll go in more details next chapter.

Welcome to the second third of the fic, you guys! I can't thank you enough for all the love you're showing for this crazy little story of mine, and I really hope you stick around a little longer. I have no idea how long it'll take for me to write and post the next chapter, but please, have faith in me?

So yeah, that's it. I hope you enjoy ^^

FALL

"*Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."*

Lewis Carroll – *Alice through the looking glass*

6. the domino effect

September, 1986

Nancy Wheeler

Nancy's roommate was one of those extremely religious do-gooder girls, even though she was really nice. She was a nursing student who wanted to work with the Red Cross and she had no chill when Nancy talked about her boyfriends, even if, well, she was coming from Utah.

She was from a rare breed of Catholics in her area, but even with the heavy amount of polyamory displays she had grown up with, she still couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that Nancy had two boyfriends, let alone that said boyfriends were pretty faithful to each other as well.

That being said, Nancy's roommate, as one would assume, absolutely hated Nancy's spring break pictures. To be fair, not many people had seen those pictures, but they *were* very beautiful, and Jonathan had made sure to print copies to the three of them. Her favorite, the one she asked him to give her a larger version, featured her, Steve and Jon in Steve's bed during one of those hot, hot Orlando nights, when the curtains were open and they could smell the breeze of the ocean and their skin was dotted with sweat even though they were all naked. So hot, that instead of urging them to stay at a safe distance from each other, they actually tangled more in a sandwich of limbs and love. A whole lot of love.

Nancy hung that photo on her wall, where she could see it every day and remember that she was one lucky woman, with two men who loved her so dearly, same way she loved them.

That wasn't the photo she kept with her, though. The one that was constantly among her planners and papers, and the one she was looking at that moment was much less erotic and very lovely – an odd-angled and slightly unfocused picture they asked a random anonymous to take of them in front of the castle at Disney World. She touched their smiling faces, Jonathan with those sunglasses that said 'I don't like this heat business' and Steve just being his best goofy self with a floral shirt that screamed 'TOURIST', even if he was living there for almost a year.

She had just gotten back to class, hardly a month in, but she missed her boys – her men. She missed them. If they were there with her, at that very moment, they'd make things so easy. Jonathan would be the so calm, as always. He wasn't much of a talker, so he'd take her hand and kiss her fingers, maybe mention something, anything but the task at hand, just to distract her.

Steve, on the other hand, would be the ball of energy. He was pro-active and loud, and he would be stringing her into arguments she

could use to convince this man that she was the right student to help him in his project, making her remember every single monster they had killed, or the details of that time she had actually stepped in another dimension, or anything that would make her case stronger.

Either way, both of them would tell her that she's got this.

She flipped some of the pages in her folder, still keeping the picture visible. Mr. Vogel was the head of Southern Maine's archeology department and even though many people pegged him as a weirdo, he still did a hell of a job. His most personal project, though – and the main reason people thought he wasn't so right in the head – was about the multiverse. That was where Nancy had found those theories about ley lines and versequakes, reading his articles.

"Ms. Wheeler?" the secretary called, and Nancy closed her folder looking up at the woman. "Mr. Vogel will see you now."

Nancy nodded and gathered her things, bag hanging on her right shoulder, and followed the secretary through the open door. She had only entered in the archeology department once, but the shelves filled with ancient artifacts and rocks (she learned in her first day that the word 'rock' was banned in there, but she could call it whatever she wanted, as long as she didn't say it out loud) still impressed her. The secretary knocked on one of the open smaller doors.

"Carmine, the student is here," she announced and gestured for Nancy to come closer and she did, getting inside the packed room where a middle aged man was sitting behind a desk analyzing a book with a magnifier.

Professor Carmine Vogel was an Irish man with dark features and grey hair. His name always made Nancy bite down a laugh when in contrast with his physical characteristics, because he was neither red nor looked like a bird, but who was she to judge parents' choice of names. He pointed at the chair in front of him and she sat down, only then noticing that the secretary had left.

"You're the kid who's been bugging me about following me in my research, huh?" he said, still not looking up and Nancy cleared her

throat.

"Yeah, that's me." As soon as she opened her mouth, he looked up at her. He seemed surprised to see her, as if he expected someone else, which was strange, because she was pretty sure she had given him her name at least more than once. "Nancy Wheeler," she said, offering her hand.

After a beat too long of consideration, Mr. Vogel dropped the magnifier and shook her hand as briefly as a handshake could be, making her feel weird. She made a mental note to tell Mike that he wasn't nearly as close as a "nerd stereotype" as he thought.

Nancy sighed, realizing that she would be doing the bigger part of the talking and just went with it.

"I've read your articles, and they got me so curious," she said, opening her folder again. Her photo was there, but she ignored it. "I like how you connected the rips in the universes with the ley lines, that one got me thinking for a long time. I even started pinpointing some things in my own map, and." Mr. Vogel was looking at her without blinking and that was a little unsettling. He had really deep black eyes. "I'm sorry, is there something wrong?"

The professor shook his head, finally blinking, and opened what she supposed was a smile.

"Pardon me, Ms. Wayland-"

"Wheeler," Nancy corrected. Seriously, it didn't even sound alike.

"Wheeler," he corrected immediately. "I guess I'm surprised to see you. You look like you should be in the pre-med course."

Nancy felt her cheeks burning a little and shrugged.

"I'm a biology minor," she said. "I *was* going to try medicine, but… things happened and I changed my mind. You see," Nancy sat straighter. "The multiverse theory you wrote with your friend from Ireland was the first article of yours I came across in a really intense time of my life and I was just fascinated, because that meant-"

She stopped short, afraid of talking too much. The theory that man wrote meant that perhaps Hawkins wasn't the only place in this country – *this world* – where monsters were being found. But she couldn't reveal that to him, not like that. She needed to have some sort of leverage with him, because whether she liked it or not, he had a big name in the archeology community and she had to be careful.

"I mean, I've heard about multiverses before but just in sci-fiction. And I know that a lot of sci-fi stuff comes from real physics theories, but I never thought that parallel universes could be such a close reality, you see? And as I've read article after article I knew what I should really be studying."

Plus, it'd give her a hell of a heads up if she ever came across another monster in her hometown, as it seemed to be where they were headed. Not that they had much information about the actual monster, that was El's job, but it was good to be prepared.

"Passionate, I like it," Mr. Vogel said, even though he didn't *look* so excited. "Tell me, Ms. Wheeler, where are you from?"

Nancy raised an eyebrow. Did that *matter*?

"Uh… Hawkins, Indiana," she answered and the professor leaned back on his chair.

"Hawkins?" he asked suspiciously. "Are you fucking with me?"

Frowning, Nancy shook her head, and then she turned to her bag to get her driver's license to show him. He took the license from her hands and only after he took a closer look at it he seemed to show some real interest in Nancy.

"You know what I noticed when I started to research ley lines based on your maps?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm and under control. "That in America, almost every Department of Energy facility is set in a city crossed by a line."

Mr. Vogel sat a bit straighter.

"What do you know about the DEO, Ms. Wheeler?" he asked, and she could feel the suspicion rise in the small room.

"Everything," she answered simply. "What do *you* know about them, professor?"

He smiled.

"Everything what, exactly?" he asked, not answering her question.

Nancy shrugged.

"Did I stutter?"

He narrowed his eyes.

"Pretty pre-med student sent to spy on me, is that it?"

"*Please*," Nancy replied. "Don't think so highly about yourself, professor. I'm on a solo mission here. I want to work alongside you to figure out what the DEO is unable to do."

"And that would be…?" the professor asked. Nancy smiled.

"I don't know, am I in or out?"

"Do you have a project?"

Nancy nodded and took a block of 15 pages with her project. She looked at it for a moment, and then sighed and handed it to the teacher.

"*A step in the Vale of Shadows*?" he read the title. "What's your point here?"

"Read it, you'll like it. Probably," Nancy guaranteed closing her folder. "And perhaps we can help each other. Heavens knows I need some help."

Mr. Vogel turned the first page and Nancy smiled. She fixed the strap of her bag on her shoulder and got up.

"My info is in the back of the cover, if you want to contact me," she told him.

Nancy turned her back to him and left the room not knowing why

she was so nervous before, nor why it worried her so much that the professor was so big in his community. She could stand up for herself, as usual. All she had to do was be a little more confident.

She stopped in the first public phone she found and checked the time. It was safe to call him now, so she picked up the phone and dialed the Orlando number hoping to find Steve home. He answered on the second ring.

"'*Sup?*" he greeted and Nancy shook her head.

"What did I tell you about phone greetings?" she asked and on the other side of the line Steve laughed.

"*Hey, babe! How was the meeting?*"

Nancy sighed.

"I don't know. I went a little overboard, I guess."

"*If you're admitting that I think it's safe to assume that you went a lot overboard. What happened?*"

She sighed again. She needed to stop doing that, because it was annoying.

"It's just… he was so suspicious, it's weird. But also, gotta know that he's tapping into something the government wants to keep hidden and all, I get that. Am I making sense?"

"*You totally ain't,*" Steve told her and despite herself, Nancy chuckled.

"I guess I have mixed feelings about him, because I don't know where his knowledge about the multiverse comes from. Don't say quantum physics."

There was a beat of silence. And then-

"*Damn, then I really don't know what to say!*" he replied. She couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic. "*Did I tell you about the amount of suffering I'm going through in Physics 3?*"

"I still don't understand why you have to learn that in order to be a Marine," Nancy confessed.

"*Because!*" Steve answered a little exasperated. They've had that conversation before. "*We all have professions inside the Marines, babe, you know that! Also because I'm trying to find my way into one of those DOE facilities and you know that part too.*"

"Yeah, but this is too long term, Steve!" Nancy exclaimed. "And there's a monster about to invade Hawkins right now."

"'*Right now' right now?*" he asked, probably to make sure. Nancy sighed.

"We need to find a way to find out what they know, because we're empty handed here," she continued. "All we know is that people who disappeared when the demogorgon came are coming back, probably out of those disgusting cocoons. Steve, I even saw Barb."

There was a noise on Steve's side, as if he had choked on something and then he coughed several times before talking.

"*Barb as in your friend Barb?*" he asked, his voice a little off from the coughing. Nancy hummed, confirming. "*How the fuck?*"

"You're the only one who knows, I didn't tell anyone else," she rushed to say. "Not even Jon. But we found three cocoons during summer, and Henry from the movie theater and Dale are back to their daily lives as if nothing happened."

Steve hummed.

"*And it didn't, if you think about it, right?*" he observed. "*Follow me in it. Will vanishes, the DEO tries to fake his death, it backfires, kid comes back. They give the community the perfect excuse with Barb: another runaway teenager. But the others? It could've just been an impeccable timing to skip town – all adults, all with an excuse to leave. No one ever knew what happened to them. They could make their alibi whatever they want.*"

"Right, but they were *dead*," Nancy stated. "How did they come back?"

"*I guess that's what we have to find out,*" Steve said very calmly. Nancy frowned.

"Did you find our lead?" she asked and he hummed.

"*I did, he's in Jacksonville scared to death,*" he informed, and she rushed to remove the cap of her pen and start writing down on the back of one of Vogel's articles. "*Couldn't get much out of him, but he recognized El's mom and another woman from New Jersey. You think Jon can go try and find something out with her?*"

"I'll ask him," Nancy said nodding. "And you keep trying too, okay? You know how to call me in the dorms if you find anything."

"*Don't worry, boss,*" he joked making her roll her eyes.

"Steve?" she called again before the call would end. He was listening. "What's the woman's name?"

[...]

Elle Hopper

When she opened her eyes, the sun was just a faint light across her window. Clock said it was almost six and it had been a little over three hours since Callie last ate. El blinked a few times trying to decide if she wanted to go back to sleep or if it'd be a good idea to get up.

The past few weeks, she and Will were getting up early to run in the forest between their house and the lake trailer, because she didn't want to let go of the routine she had in camp and he wouldn't let her walk those woods alone. It helped with her cardio for games, even if she hadn't been playing hockey since the class tournament at the beginning of the month, and it was good distraction for him. Principal was right, sports were helping El with the "anger issues," so she might as well go along with it.

However, it was Saturday morning, and she didn't exactly *feel* like treating Saturday the same way she treated the other days of the week.

Callie made a small noise, deciding for El what to do with that morning, and she sat up on her bed and stretched yawning. It was really early and it was starting to get cold at night, so she was wearing the flannel PJs Joyce had given her for Christmas last year.

She got up and pulled the curtains, almost tripping on the box where she had put all the things Mike had given or lent to her while they were together, and the things that reminded her of him. That box was there since June and she still didn't come around to giving them back yet. The envelope with the birthday card and ring he had sent to her was recently added to the top of the pile and El had been denying to even look at the box.

El went to Callie's crib and saw that the baby was awake already, but quiet. Not that she wouldn't start wailing with hunger soon, but at the moment, she was silently laid on her small mattress, under her soft purple blanket looking up at the solar system mobile that used to be Jon's and then Will's hung above her head, blue eyes following the planets around its solar axis. El touched Callie's rosy cheek and smiled at the way the baby pouted and moved her little arms, and then she put her mind in the kitchen only a couple of rooms down, opening the fridge and getting a bottle out, getting a pan and filling it with water to boil and heat the bottle before she even got there.

Hop was sitting by the table with a mug of coffee looking beyond exhausted. Her doing domestic things using only her mind had become normal for him over a year ago, so he barely looked up to see the stove being turned on by its own. Those little domestic tasks were teaching El how to multitask, which was more than she ever did at the labs, and something she struggled with when she was away.

"You okay?" El asked, getting in the kitchen and checking to see if everything was in the right place, the bottle inside the pan with the water that was slowly starting to boil. Hop sighed.

"Just a long night, baby," he replied, finally looking up. El leaned against the sink. "We found another cocoon. Well, some teens from Indiana stumbled on it on the other side of the labs. Who knows what the fuck they were doing around here, but it scared them to death."

"To *death*?" she echoed. "They died?"

Despite everything, Hop smiled.

"It's just a saying," he explained. "Funny how there are things you still don't know."

El sighed.

"I've been reading a lot, and watching a bunch of TV, but I still miss on a lot," she confessed and Hop nodded sympathetically.

"But," he said pointing at her. "You have many, many friends, and that's the best way to pick up on social skills, so go El!"

She chuckled and then looked at the stove. Milk was about ready.

"You should rest, dad," she said, getting a kitchen cloth to wrap the floating bottle of milk with and then turning down the stove before getting closer to him. "Can't have you tired tomorrow."

"What about tomorrow?" Hop asked, and El stopped short, suddenly terrified that he had forgotten, and then he smiled. "I'm joking." He guaranteed, making her breathe relieved. "Of course I didn't forget about tomorrow, baby, the big day! We gotta be up early, so don't you go tiring yourself today either, huh?"

"I won't," El said. Sunday would be the last day of tryouts in Ohio for kids her age, and her last shot to make it to a team. She didn't get a call from any other team she tried for the past month. "Go get some sleep, daddy."

She kissed Hop's cheek and then headed back to her room, where Callie was starting to get a little antsy. She put the bottle down and picked up the baby, cradling her in her arms like Joyce taught her, and Hopper passed by their room going to his. Outside, the dogs were scratching at the door, so she opened it to let them in. El finally started feeding Callie and casted an interested look at the rocking chair by the window, but the dogs went all the way in the corridor and it caught her attention, so she went to take a look and saw them sit in front of the bathroom door.

Frowning, El got closer to the door already knowing who was inside. She tried to reach out, and even though it was harder without a bath,

they were close enough and had a strong enough connection for it to work out at some extent. And she didn't like what she felt.

"Will?" she called quietly. She knew that he would hear. "Do you need help?"

He didn't answer. He didn't even move. It was quiet in the bathroom, but not in a good way. The dogs laid down in front of the door so El leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor, careful not to distress Callie. She would wait as long as it was necessary for Will to come out.

And it took a long time. Callie finished her bottle, and that kid was a slow eater. El put her to burp, and after that the baby still wanted to suck on something else, so she held to her big sister's hand and sucked on her knuckle while El waited for Will to get better. When Joyce got up, almost an hour later, that was the scene she faced – El on the floor with the baby and the dogs in front of the bathroom door.

"What are you doing?" she asked frowning. El looked up at Joyce.

"She really needs a pacifier," she said, letting Joyce take the baby from her arms.

"Tell me about it!" the woman said. "But what are you doing?"

El looked at the bathroom door and Molly cried. She reached out and patted the dog's fur.

"It's Will with the migraine again," she said. "He won't let me in."

"Can't you just open the lock?" Joyce wondered and El shook her head.

"He won't let me," she replied. She was stronger than Will, everyone knew, but that wasn't the only factor in that situation. "And I don't want him to force it."

She got on her knees and got closer to the door again, now with her arms free, palms against the wooden door.

"Will," she called. "Please, let us help."

"You can't help," he said, and even though his voice was really low, she still could hear him.

"What did he say?" Joyce asked.

"We can try," El replied to Will. "All you have to do is stop fighting us. Please, open the door."

For a second, it seemed like he wouldn't give in and El held her breath waiting for the worst. Will's migraines had been pretty bad the past couple of times, so bad he'd been feeling really sick. And then, when she was starting to think that there was no way they could get him out, the door unlocked and cracked open.

El stepped back, giving space for Joyce to go check on her son, and even though the smell was faint, her nostrils still burned with the acid smell of vomit, which worried her more. *Oh, Will, what is happening to you?*

As if they could tell that space was necessary, the dogs stepped behind El and as soon as the door was completely open they saw Will on the floor between the tub and the toilet bowl; he was covering his eyes with his arm and he wasn't moving, because it'd hurt more if he did. Joyce gasped and gave Callie to El again, rushing to aid her son.

"Jim!" she called a little desperate and then kneeled by Will's side, touching him with worried hands. "Will, baby, what are you feeling? Tell me what you're feeling."

Looking to be useful, El knocked on Joyce and Hopper's room and then opened it. Hop already had sat up on the bed and looked at her.

"It's okay, I didn't get to sleep yet anyway," he said, trying to sound funny, but he just sounded too tired for humor. Joyce called again. "The migraine?" El nodded. "We gotta take him to a hospital."

"I'm not sure hospitals will help," El told him quietly, and Hopper frowned.

"Do you know something?"

She shook her head no and stepped aside to let him pass.

"Dad?" she called and he looked back at her. "Can I skip school Tuesday to go see my mom?"

He narrowed his eyes, watching her.

"We'll talk about it later," he answered, and then joined Joyce in the bathroom to help her get Will to his room.

El called the dogs and decided to stay out of the adults' way for a while, just until they figured out what to do. She got Callie's chair and went with her and the dogs to the kitchen, where she decided to make some cocoa and Eggos that she ate with strawberry and honey before she'd go for her morning run. Maybe, if she went away for a while, when she'd come back Will would be feeling better.

By the time she finished eating, Hop already had come to take Callie to his room with him, so she went to her room and put on some comfortable clothes and sneakers for the run, tied her hair in a ponytail and got the Walkman and tape Jonathan had given to her for her birthday.

"I made breakfast," El said stopping by Will's door. Joyce was sitting by his side on the bed, but he had his back to the door as she stroked his hair lightly with a wet cloth. The room was dark and the air stuffed. She just looked at El and nodded, and then the girl went to her run.

Jonathan had made her a different mix this time, filled with jazz and blues and things he was getting used to listening to now that he was in New York, and it gave a different rhythm to her run. She ran through the usual path she and Will liked to take to get to the lake house. It passed about a mile behind the Harringtons', and then they had to follow alongside the lake to get to the house, but they never got too close because the property was theirs, but there were other people living there. When they were feeling competitive, they'd make the way in twenty minutes, but El had this blues song playing and she was in another mood.

She got to the lake's deck in half an hour and the sun was starting to

peek from the top of the threes on the water. For a few minutes, she let herself breathe and think of all the things she heard last night when she tapped her supercom with the police's radio, the things about a group of teenagers scared to death because apparently a man came out of a massive cocoon found near the DOE labs almost on the edge of the city. She thought about it and about Nancy showing her a map of Indiana filled with weird lines and how one of those lines passed exactly on the edge of Hawkins, and how it seemed to matter.

But more than that, El thought about how she wanted Mike to be wrong. Everything about his campaign, though not accurate, dangerously resonated reality and if he was right again, she didn't know what to do.

The sun warmed El's skin and almost made her smile, but then she remembered that Will was home burning with fever, unable to go outside because it pained him, and so she turned on her tracks and ran back home, this time with ten fewer minutes in order to get there as fast as possible.

Joyce was in the kitchen staring at an unlit cigarette between her fingers, a mug of coffee going cold in front of her. She had quit smoking during her pregnancy (even though each day of it she claimed it'd been the hardest thing to do, because she was constantly stressed), and after Callie was born, she just didn't want to pass the smoking smell to the baby, but El wouldn't judge if she went back to that habit soon.

"How's he doing now?" El asked catching Joyce's attention. "Did he eat?"

Joyce sighed and then shook her head no. Will not eating meant that he still wasn't well enough to keep any food down. He lost some weight lately, and El knew that he was telling everyone it was because he was exercising with her, but she suspected it wasn't the only reason. And if Will wasn't healthy, *strong* enough, then he wouldn't be strong enough to fight when the time came.

El went to his room again. He still wasn't moving and he still had his back to the door, but she could hear his breathing now, which was more than before. She crossed the dark room with the heavy curtains

to look at him and saw that there was a bowl with water on the floor, that his fingers were touching it even though his eyes were still closed. El kneeled down by his side and touched his wrist, causing him to shiver a little, startled. She held his arm with both hands, leaned against his bed.

"Will," she said softly.

His lips moved but she couldn't make out what he was saying. He was burning with a fever and the humid cloth that Joyce had put on his forehead had fell between the bed and the nightstand, so El treated to get it and use the water in the bowl to wet it again and then place it back on his forehead, all without using her hands. He needed to know he wasn't alone.

"I've got you," she told him. "You're not alone, I've got you."

With closed eyes, he still mumbled, and slowly, patiently, she was starting to make sense of what he was saying.

"*…Or dream - dream again -, dream of a silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs - I don't know, that's all words -, never wake - all words, there's nothing else -. You must go on, that's all I know*."

Samuel Beckett. Will's copies of *The Trilogy* were the most beating down books El had ever seen, and she only read them once, afraid they'd fall in crumbles in her hands, but those last words always stuck with her as the closest to understanding literature she's gotten.

"*I can't go on*," Will said, his voice cracking. El held his hand tighter, her fingers touching the water too.

"You must go on," she said back.

His eyes cracked open just the littlest bit and looked for the source of the voice and the smallest of the reliefs passed by his body when he focused on her. Will shivered.

"Hey, twinsie," he said, and this time El really smiled. *Hi, brother*.

El took a quick shower and spent a long time trying to tie her hair the way Jennifer had taught her, trying to give it some volume. Last

time she cut her hair was November, and it was getting long again, but she wasn't sure she wanted to cut it off again. When she was happy enough with the result, she chose a pair of jeans that was a little ripped on the knees, a red loose top and her black Chucks before going back to Will's room to choose one of his jackets. She picked a leather one of The Clash that wasn't too big for her.

"What are you doing?" Will asked, his voice weak and El looked at him smiling.

"Getting ready for work," she answered. She knew what he was going to say – that she didn't have a job today, and that she should be getting ready for tomorrow, but before he could say anything she already was out of his room.

Joyce was in the living room cleaning, probably because that was the only thing she could do as she waited for Will to get better.

"I'm going downtown," El informed and Joyce looked at her confused. "I'll see if Solomon lets me work in Will's place today."

"What?" the woman exclaimed, dropping the cushion she was changing. "Why?"

"I have nothing to do today!" she explained. "And I know we can't lose money, so I'm going. Plus, if I'm Will's replacement, they can't replace him. Right?"

Joyce frowned.

"I don't know where you got that idea, but okay, see if it works. But know it might not."

"I know, mom," El replied with a smile and opened the door. "I'll be back in a few hours."

El got Will's old bike from the shed. He'd been hardly using it since he outgrown it a little, and now he was more of a roller skates person anyway. She cut through Mirkwood and made it downtown in a record time of eighteen minutes. On foot, it'd easily be a half hour walk. El left the bike in the alley behind the store and got in through the back door.

"Byers?" she heard Solomon call from the store.

"No," she replied. "Hopper."

Will's boss's head appeared on the door that separated the back to the front of the store and he was frowning under all that hair.

"What the hell?"

"Will is sick," El told him. "Can I stay in his place today? We really need the money."

Solomon seemed to consider for a moment, and then he stepped in the back room, his confused frown turned into a worried stare.

"He's been getting sick regularly. Maybe he shouldn't be working."

El panicked a little inside, but kept her front.

"Please, don't even think about it! He loves this job, and I promise you he doesn't want to quit at all. Just let me work when he's not here, so we can keep the money?"

The boss sighed.

"What do you even know about music, Ellie?"

El shrugged.

"I live with Will and Jonathan Byers, I dated Mike Wheeler. My best friend is Dustin Henderson," she argued in her favor and Solomon sighed again. "I'm a jock."

"Okay, you made your point," he cut her. "We can try having you here today, *as a test*," he said and she smiled. "And only because your baby sister is the cutest baby I've ever seen. If you do well, we'll talk. But just know it's hard to top your brother, he's the best salesman I've ever had."

"I'll let you know charm runs in the family," El said, taking off the jacket and heading to the front of the store. She stopped at the door and Solomon shook his head. "Where do I start?"

"We got a bunch of blues albums a couple of days ago from Detroit," he told her. "And we still didn't put everything in place yet. The boxes are behind the counter, you can start with them." El nodded. "Ellie," Solomon called again. "Will's been getting sick a lot lately, even when he actually makes it to work. He fakes well, but I notice. You don't think… he's got some cancer, do you?"

Nothing like that, no, El thought, but the words failed to come out, in part because he kind of did have some sort of cancer, if one looked at it clinically. It just wasn't something medicine could treat. So she shook her head denying it.

"It's just a high fever, don't worry," she guaranteed, and it was easy to tell that Solomon didn't completely believe her, but at least he let it go.

El needed a little over an hour to finish putting all the albums in their places in the blues section and another forty minutes organizing the sales table by artists. There was a bunch of old and diverse stuff in that table and she was having fun. At the end of her second hour, still no clients around, Solomon asked her what she wanted to eat and he ordered burgers from the new steak house that had taken over Benny's old place, and they took turns eating in the back.

Her first client came after lunch bringing along a talkative six year old that El adored.

"Ellie!" Holly exclaimed as soon as they crossed the front door. El smiled.

"Where's Will?" Mike asked frowning and El looked at him.

"He's got a fever," she told him, giving away as little detail as possible. "So I'm the replacement."

"Fair," he commented and then looked down, because Holly was desperately pulling his hand trying to catch his attention. "What is it?"

She raised her arms, reaching for him.

"I can't see!" Holly exclaimed, jumping in place to emphasize that he

should take her in his arms and Mike did so and put her sitting on the counter. "Much better."

"You know you're getting too big for laps, right?" he argued and his little sister shook her head so seriously it was funny.

"I'm not," she assured and then turned to El. "Your hair is really pretty today," she said taking one of El's strands in her tiny hand.

"Thank you, Hol," El replied. "Maybe I can teach you how to do your hair like this someday, huh?"

Holly's eyes lit up.

"Would you?" she asked and El nodded.

"Of course!"

"*Cool!*" Holly exclaimed prolonging her vowels. "Oh, Ellie, it's good you're here because I have a serious question for you."

"Oh, wow. Okay," El stood straighter. "Shoot."

Holly sat straighter too, head high. She was in business mode, and the only time that happened was during-

"What's your favorite *Star Wars* movie?" she asked and El smiled. She *knew* it.

"Easy. *The return of the Jedi*," she answered and Holly seemed satisfied with the answer.

"That's my favorite too," Holly told El. Not that she didn't know it already. "I'm hoping you and Will still want to participate with us, right?"

"Holly's Halloween?" El asked and the little girl nodded. "Of course we want to! Hol, it's an honor to be part of your plans."

Holly smiled and blushed, but she quickly shook it off, going back to her professional posture.

"Great, because you're my Leia and Will is my Luke. I need you both. The fantasies will be inspired by episode VI, and if you have trouble finding anything, my mom can help, okay?"

El nodded.

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "Everything will be perfect for your favorite night."

"I hope so," the little blonde sighed. "Everything's been so weird."

El and Mike exchanged a look and then looked at Holly again. El clapped her hands.

"I assume you guys came here to find some neat music for the best night of the year, huh?" she said going around the counter. "Now, I know you already have the whole *Star Wars* soundtrack, so why not put something else in the mix, what do you think? We got a bunch of new stuff this week."

"Suggestions, Ellie?" Holly asked crossing her legs Indian style on the counter.

"You betcha!" El replied excitedly. "In fact, I saw something today that you might like, Mike," she said sorting through the blues section. "I thought it'd take longer to arrive because it's really clique-ish, but…"

She found the album and showed the cover to Mike, who raised an eyebrow impressed.

"Eddie Guitar Burns?" he exclaimed taking the album she was offering. "How do you know about him?"

"Jonathan," she explained. "He made this jazz and blues tape for me and I can't stop listening to it. In fact!"

El opened her hand and Mike placed the album on her palm. She walked to the record player and got the record out, checking to see which side was A or B before placing it and the needle in the exact place she wanted. As soon as it was set, she started talking again.

"One of the songs of the mix is here."

She hit play and the disc started to circle, and then the song started to play. *You got to love me with a feeling, baby*, Big Ed would start singing, *and run your fingers all through my hair*. It was the kind of song Lexi would call "sexy" and El couldn't help but to start dancing.

Holly giggled and El took Mike's hand, leading him to dance too.

You got to hurt me with a feeling, baby, and let me know that your love is real. If you don't have that feeling, and then this love affair ain't going nowhere…

Suddenly, they were too close and the lyrics were too personal, and even though El tried her hardest not to look in Mike's eyes, that's what she ended up doing – and regretting immediately.

They stopped dancing and just stood there in the middle of the store, one of his hands on her waist, the other holding hers, and her other hand was on his shoulder and for a second it was like old times, except that El soon remembered Spencer Hall in her beautiful black dress standing this close to Mike and she had to step back.

"I think…" Mike started and looked at Holly, who was looking from him to El and frowning. "Uh… I will take the album. And we can come back another day to find more music, right Fozzie?"

Holly nodded, but it was easy to tell that she wasn't sure he was talking to her. El turned off the music and got the disc for Mike in silence, then, finding it best to stay quiet before she could say something stupid – like how she had a box filled with his things by her window that she wasn't able to be rid of because she still wanted him back, even though she shouldn't have to.

He paid for the album and helped Holly down from the counter.

"You have the tryouts tomorrow, right?" he asked already half turned to the door. El nodded. "Nervous?"

"Very," she answered and he smiled.

"You shouldn't be. You're great."

"Thanks," El said and Mike nodded.

"You did finish the writing exercise, right?" he asked and she swallowed.

"It isn't for Monday, is it?" Mike shook his head.

"Wednesday," he told her and she nodded relieved. She could postpone that torture for a couple more days.

"Yeah, sure," she replied, though she had to admit it wasn't very convincing.

"Okay," Mike said taking Holly's hand. "I guess I'll see you soon. Good luck tomorrow."

"Good luck, Ellie!" Hol exclaimed and El smiled and waved.

"Thanks, guys," she replied, her voice was a little weak. It was barely two and already such an eventful day.

El had to prepare her mind, because there was so much more to come in the following days; she only knew how to begin: by waking up at 4 a.m. the next morning and going with Hop to Ohio to find herself a team, and even so her plan only covered Sunday and she didn't know how to handle the rest of the day yet.

Near the closing hour, and after a couple of successful sales that got Solomon nodding impressed, their last customer arrived. El didn't see her come in because she had gone through the back to take the trash out, but as soon as she crossed the door, she heard her.

"Then what happened?" the girl asked.

Solomon sighed dramatically.

"Maria Alessandra, *I don't know*."

El went to the front of the store and saw Lexi leaning on the counter. She had her long, long black hair loose on her shoulders and a blue beret on and she looked at El with a mix of confusion and surprise.

"Lexi?" El called, and her friend smiled. "You're looking for Will?"

"Yeah," she answered. "I just had my last class of the day and he usually walks me home. What happened?"

"He's got a fever," El told her and Lexi nodded.

"Did he check on that immune system? Because he gotta," she said and El shrugged.

"I'm just about leaving," she told Lexi. "I know it's not the same, but I can walk with you today."

"Really?" Lexi exclaimed, sounding genuinely glad. Truth was, the two girls barely had time together lately – and even before that, in part because El was still trying to avoid Lexi, but she knew she would have to let it go eventually, right? She nodded.

"Sure. Just give me five minutes."

Lexi nodded and spent that time going over the sales albums in the central table of the store. When the clock hit five, she went outside and waited for El on the sidewalk, and then the two girls started the walk home together.

"I have fruit rollups, you want some?" Lexi offered awkwardly. Because of the gymnastic classes she always carried a big bag with all kinds of stuff. At first, El thought about refusing the rollups, but she was a sucker for sugary treats, so she accepted one.

"Sometimes I think I might want to work in a candy factory, like Willy Wonka's," El confessed staring at her delicious fruit mix and Lexi chuckled.

"*Why?*" she asked. "I mean, you could be *anything*." El sighed.

"Yeah, but sometimes I just want for things to be boring, you know? To have a simple life in a cute cul de sac house with uneventful winters."

"Uh," Lexi scoffed. "Like Mike's house, you say?"

"I didn't *say* that," El replied too fast and Lexi raised an eyebrow. "And he doesn't have uneventful winters."

"Ellie," Lexi said stopping. El stopped too, balancing Will's bike with one hand. "It's okay if you still like him, you know?"

"I'm not talking about that," El said firmly.

"Why not?" Lexi insisted. "You know I still think that you two breaking up was bullshit! What's wrong with admitting that it was a mistake?"

"He moved on, Lexi, and so am I!"

"The fuck you are," she said scoffing again and El started walking again, but she stopped less than two meters after.

"You want to know why I didn't call during the summer?" she practically screamed to the girl catching up with her. "Because I blamed you. I still do."

Lexi stopped short, mouth ajar.

"Me? You blame *me* for your breakup?" she exclaimed baffled. "Me, who told you all the way that you shouldn't listen to Jennifer freaking out? You ghosted *me* instead of the girl who kept raising doubt about *your* feelings for your boyfriend just because she couldn't admit to herself that she fell in love with a geek?"

"Yes."

"In what kind of messed up planet does that make sense?" Lexi screamed too, hands in the air.

El swallowed.

"Jennifer didn't tell Mike," she explained trying to control her voice. "You did."

Lexi put her hands on her hips and frowned.

"I told him so he wouldn't freak out," she said and this time El was

the one who scoffed.

"You went behind my back, Lexi, and you caused the exact opposite!" El said, feeling the control escape her. She really should put her life in order, because she was starting to lose it. And by 'it' she meant 'sanity'. Was this what being a teenager was supposed to be? "*I* was gonna tell him. But instead you did, and there went all my chances of getting him to see clearly. You fucked it up for us, Lexi, and I had a real hard time letting it go."

Lexi seemed balanced, maybe because El hardly ever put that many words together so angrily.

"I never wan-" she started, but El cut her off.

"I know you didn't." She assured. "But it was exactly what happened. I know you thought you were in the right to tell him because you're friends with the boys now, *but you don't know Mike*."

El had to take a deep breath and then another. That wasn't what she had planned for that end of day, and the sun was starting to set. They weren't even halfway home yet and she wouldn't pass through Mirkwood at night, so add another ten minutes to her ride home.

"Ellie, I'm sorry," Lexi said to El's back, because she already was pushing the bike down the street again. "But it was very fucked up of you to shut me out like that. You think I don't know you only called me in my *quinces* because Nancy Wheeler told you so? Were you really going to completely ignore the most important day for me?"

"I don't know," El replied without looking at her. "Maybe."

They walked in silence for several minutes, no one daring to open their mouth and start another argument. El wondered if that was what Karen meant when she talked about girl friends drama last New Year's Eve. And she knew that she was being a little irrational, because Lexi was awesome and she really cared about her, but there were some things that blurred all the edges, making you not see straight. They reached the park in front of Lexi's house.

"I'm sorry I snapped," El said staring at the front wheel of the bike.

"And I'm sorry I'm such a shitty friend."

"Well, I do have a really hard time understanding you, because you're so damn mysterious, but I'm sorry too," Lexi replied and they looked at each other and smiled.

"I didn't want to flip out, but I'm having some real trouble with English and writing and it's driving me a little mad," El continued. "Also, I didn't get selected by any hockey team so far, which makes me think I'm a fraud, and even if I get something tomorrow, if I don't get my grades up by midterms I'll be cut anyway, and it's really fucking hard to shake off the two Fs I already have."

"Where did you get Fs?" Lexi asked shocked. "Writing?" El nodded. "That's bullshit."

"No, it's not," El corrected. "I suck, Lexi. Like, I'm really fucking terrible at it."

"But you're such an avid reader! And you're musically talented. What the fuck?"

El shrugged, leaving the question hang. They stopped in front of Lexi's house and so she hopped on the bike. Lexi touched her wrist lovingly.

"You know what, focus on one thing at a time," she advised. "It's what I try to do when I see I'm about to break. First the tryouts tomorrow. And once you get in a team you have an extra reason to try your best in school too."

El balanced the words in her head and nodded.

"That's actually good advice," she commented and Lexi smiled.

"I know, right?" she exclaimed. "I should start charging."

They hugged and said goodbye, and El felt a lot better about Lexi now that she'd gotten everything that was on her chest out. She went home and arrived just in time for dinner, and the best part was that Will was up and talking, and he sat to eat with them. He thanked her for replacing him when she handed him his check of the week and

they all sat together to watch a Hallmark movie, but El barely made it to the first forty minutes. Hop had to carry her to her bed and set her alarm to 4 a.m.. Good thing she had prepared all her hockey apparel the previous day, because it'd be a stress to put everything together last minute.

By the end of the weekend, the two hour drive back was of excitement and happy songs. El got picked for the same team as Jennifer, which meant that she had company to come and go in every practice. Hop was all the way talking about El being "drafted", but she was picked last, so the wording felt a little strong.

She wouldn't tell him that, though, especially because with all the excitement, Hopper let her skip class Tuesday to go to Indianapolis to see her mother. El also guessed that it wouldn't be a good thing to kill the mood by giving him her second F of the semester for him to sign, so that was postponed too.

Between busy weekends and a hellish Monday with almost crying crisis in the middle of fifth period, El made it to Tuesday practically unscathed. She woke up early to catch a ride with Joyce to the bus station and sat outside with her English/writing notebook to try and come up with that damn essay due tomorrow.

It was simple narrative, at least a thousand words about a naughty kitten which wasn't exactly long or supposedly hard, but she simply didn't have it in her, El was sure. She couldn't bring herself to put the words together and create a story, it was just so damn hard for her to simply talk to people, let alone write!

Growing up, she didn't have books and enough interaction to develop that part of her brain. They taught her how to read and write, had her develop her linguistics cognition, but they never, ever pushed her to create for herself, never allowed her any imagination. After a while, she just didn't know what to imagine.

El flipped the pages of her notebook until she found the paper she was supposed to fill in case she decided to quit the creative writing class. She had gone as far as filling all the blanks, but she still hadn't brought herself to ask for Hopper to sign it, just like the last essay she failed and was shoved somewhere down her backpack. She wished

she could do the same with English too. Why couldn't she just take Spanish? It was so much simpler.

A man sat by El's side and he smelled weird, so she looked up at him. He was all dirty, with ratty clothes and for some reason he looked familiar. He was trembling, as if he had a cold, and El observed him for a while, not really bothered with the smell. That too was familiar.

His mouth was moving, but there wasn't any sound coming out. Despite the warm sun outside, he kept rubbing his hands on his arms and then his stomach, and it occurred to her that maybe he was hungry. El had saved some Eggos for the trip, but she could make more when she got to her mother's, so she reached for her backpack on the floor and got the paper bag with the waffles and offered it to him. The man didn't show any sign of reaching for the bag, just rocking back and forth manically, and it worried her.

"Are you hungry, sir?" El asked, trying to keep her voice soft so she wouldn't startle him. "You can have my Eggos."

As if her words had turned the volume up, the man's words started to make better sense too and she could make out some.

"*…it is, as always, plotting, scheming, working, fighting. Plotting, scheming, working, fighting. Communism isn't sleeping; it is, as always…*"

El frowned, goosebumps going up her arms and spine and a worry beyond herself. She knew those words, knew where she heard them. They had followed her through every test they ran ever since she was really little.

"Sir?" she called again.

The man rubbed one hand with the other shivering, his words unrecognizable again as he shivered more and more, so El dared to reach out and touch his shoulder and, as expected, he jumped at the contact, grabbing the bench they were sitting on for dear life.

Immediately, everything got cold, as cold as his body felt under her touch, or more, and El watched with wide eyes the bench turning into ice inch by inch. She got on her feet with a jump, afraid of being

iced too and unsure of what to do. At that very moment, the bus for Indianapolis stopped right in front of them and a couple of people got out, including the driver. The man kept talking.

"Can't get warm because it's a cold, cold war and the cold war isn't thawing," he said and El shook her head.

If she focused, she'd look at her watch and know how much time exactly she had until the bus would start off to Indianapolis, but at that moment all she had in mind was to put her things back in her bag and get as far away from him as possible, an instinct almost physical of stepping back, like when-

El paused in shock, letting her copy of *Emma* fall on the ground noisily. The man stopped talking and she looked up at him again, dread taking over her body. His eyes locked on hers and recognition washed over him, making him, for the first time, look normal, even if he was the center of an ice bomb and everything around him was frozen. He blinked and his hands relaxed on the bench.

"Eleven," he said looking right at El and she had never in her life levitated something so fast like she made that book come back to her hands, her stomach tight with tension. "Gosh, how have you grown," he continued tilting his head a little. He frowned. "How long has it been?"

The wind blew softly, bringing along a whisper. El looked around and up at the trees across the street, and down the streets where people fixed the front of their stores or looked for a place to go and whispered.

They were coming.

"It got me," he said looking down. "The monster. I thought I died."

"We all did," El said. Except that she didn't, really. Papa never told her. And he was one of the nicest with her back in the labs.

He looked up at her again and smiled. Now that she was actually looking at him, he looked healthy, strong. He was just dirty, and the smell… it was something like… blood. El swallowed.

"Shepherd, what happened?"

Shepherd didn't answer and looked down the street, his eyes taking in the place he was in. The driver of the bus came back with a cup of coffee in his hand and opened the door to let the people in. And then Shepherd smiled.

"It's okay," he said. "They're coming for me."

That didn't sound good, to be honest, and El heard his name in the wind again. They were close. The driver turned on the bus and her guts told her that as far and as safe as possible right now would be her mother's home in Indianapolis, and so she rushed to hop in the bus the way it was planned all along, hoping that the forty minute drive would pass in a jiff.

El jumped off the bus in a neighbor community, the closest stop to the Ives's home, and she had never made that distance so fast, running for dear life through the busy suburban streets until she reached the odd neighborhood her family spent their whole lives in. Aunt Becky's car wasn't in the front because she was working and El left the door open as she rushed inside, leaving jackets and backpacks on the way to the back yard, where her mother would most likely be, shouting for the woman who could provide her some answers.

"MOM?" El called over and over and she almost collided with Terry on the way out the kitchen door. The woman held her shoulders with both hands, to help her keep her balance.

"Jane!" Terry exclaimed. "I thought you'd come after class."

"Mom, you have to tell me what's going on," El said right away, no small talk this time. "I know that you know, so *please, please* tell me what to do!"

"Baby," Terry sighed and pushed El's sweaty hair back lovingly. She was so out of breath, and if she hadn't been doing all that cardio work with Will, there was no way she'd be standing in front of her mother right now.

El's heart tightened with the thought of Will. He was fine now, but…

"Please, mommy," she pleaded and Terry gave her the faintest of the smiles. There was a streak of dirt on her neck and El suspected that she was working on her garden.

"I made some lemonade," she said. "Why don't you go sit down while I get us some, huh?"

Processing things slower now that the adrenalin was wearing off, El nodded and looked over the back porch, where there was a rocking bench. She stumbled toward it feeling lightheaded. With the whole thing with Shepherd, she didn't even eat the food she'd brought and now she regretted leaving the backpack inside the house.

"The front door," El said sitting down. "It's open."

She heard the sound of the door being shut loudly and then her mother's small kitten jumped on her lap without warning. El was still so not used to cats liking her that it took a moment for her to relax and start petting him. He had a black collar now with a tag on it, and he was really sweet, even when he bit her with those sharp little teeth.

"Casper," El read on the tag. "Like the friendly ghost?"

"I used to love those cartoons when I was little," Terry said, showing up with a tray with two glasses of juice and some sandwiches that she set on the wooden box improvised as a table.

"But he's black and white," El observed and her mom shrugged.

"So?"

They smiled and then Terry got the glasses of juice, offered one to El who gladly accepted it. The drink was extra cold, which helped her body temperature to drop faster after all that running. She chose a sandwich – even though they were all the same cheese, tomato and mayonnaise flavor – and only started talking again when she already was halfway through it, feeling that her ideas were all in place.

"Do you remember Roscoe Grayson?" she asked and Terry froze, avoiding looking at her for a second too long. "Nancy's boyfriend, Steve, met him in Orlando earlier this month. He recognized you in a

photo."

Terry said nothing, so El decided to continue.

"He also recognized a woman he called Moira Flint, do you know her?" she took a sip of her juice without taking her eyes off her mother, who just stared at her. "She lives in New Jersey now, apparently, and she's a medium. Jonathan consulted with her, said she seems legit."

No response.

"You obviously heard the calls, knew about the incubators," El continued. "You knew they were coming, that's what you meant when I came here before camp, wasn't it?"

El bit on her sandwich again and chewed slowly, going over everything she gathered.

"The incubators," she said, mouth half full. "They were there, but they are showing up here, and everyone think they're cocoons, but that's not quite right, is it?"

Her glass was empty, so she put it back on the tray, used the free hand to pet Casper again.

"Those people were dead, mom, I saw them *dead and gone*," El said firmly, looking at her mother. "But those incubators brought them back, transformed them. Didn't they? And that's not the work of an ordinary monster."

"Nor an ordinary person," Terry spoke for the first time and El stared at her.

"I need you to give me more, mom," she pleaded. "What is going on? Who are they?"

Terry raised an eyebrow.

"You tell me," she nodded and El drew in a breath. She didn't want to say it, as if saying would somehow make it real. She sucked it up.

"Mike called it the Thessalmonster," she said and her mother hummed with a little humor. "What's funny?"

"That's the same dungeons thing you kids used before to figure out what was going on, right?" Terry asked and El nodded. "Yeah, he liked to create those fantasy worlds in his head, but there wasn't such a thing as D&D in our time."

El frowned.

"Who's *he*?"

Terry shrugged and patted El's knee.

"No one important, sweetheart. Why do you think I'll have any answers to your questions?"

"Because you're my mom and you know everything," El replied. Terry smiled and shook her head. Casper jumped back to the ground, already tired of the women's company. "Mom, I really need help. Those people, the ones who are coming back, they were taken by the Demogorgon. Like Will."

"And?" Terry encouraged. El sighed.

"And he's sick. He was fine, but he's sick now and we don't know why. It's something medicine can't help with, I'm certain. But…" she looked at her mother sadly, and Terry touched her face with care, her thumb tracing her cheekbone softly. "Why is he sick, mom?"

Terry hummed again.

"Oh, my beautiful Jane…" she sighed. "Why did you come here and tell me all those things?"

El shrugged.

"I just thought…" she looked down, stared at her mother's necklace. It was one of those necklaces with that little case where you put photos. Terry had never shown her the photos she'd put inside. "I think it's all connected, that's why."

Terry nodded and El looked at her again.

"Even your friend-"

"Brother," El corrected.

"*Brother* being sick?" the girl nodded. Terry offered her a sad smile. "Then I'm afraid you already know why this is happening to him."

If she listened closely, El would be able to hear her heart breaking in a million pieces. She wanted so badly to be wrong, the way she wanted Mike to be wrong, and the way she wanted everything to be a bad dream like the ones that were becoming rarer and rarer in her sleep.

No such luck.

"What do we do, mom? We can't lose him."

"You're right, you can't," Terry agreed. "And the best part is, *you still have time*. The turning, it's a long process. There's time."

"You think?" El asked, for the first time feeling a little bit of hope.

"I *know*, baby."

El breathed. How did such trivial thing became such a challenge?

"Now think," Terry continued. "What stopped the change before?"

The girl frowned, trying to remember.

"I wasn't here," she said, going over all she heard about the year she was M.I.A. and they all had to face monsters alone. "There was a demon, a… displacer? That attacked their friend Max, but she wasn't hit." El stopped, wide eyed. "Oh, my God. The displacer's venom! It was supposed to kill a person, but Will didn't die. It neutralized the thessal!" she held her mother's hand. "Am I right? Please, tell me I'm right."

"You might be on the right path, yes," Terry said smiling to her daughter.

"If we get some more displacer venom, maybe we can help Will."

"You can buy more time, for sure, but I don't think it'll solve the problem," Terry said, making El's hope falter a little. "You'll still have to find a way to stop him from turning, and I'm afraid I don't know how."

El sighed.

"Yeah, me neither," she confessed.

"Hey, Janey," Terry called softly and El looked at her. "You'll figure it out, baby. You're smart, and you can do this."

El took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was still hungry, so she got herself another of those sandwiches.

"I just really want for everything to be fine, you know?" she said looking at her own hands, and Terry rubbed her shoulder.

"I know, sweetheart," she said. "And it's that will you have that will push you forward to a solution."

"You think?" El asked pouting.

"Baby, I'm certain," Terry guaranteed, and that felt like enough for now.

There still was a lot to be done, but if El had learned one thing in her life it was to take one step at a time. That was the only way to keep walking – one step at a time.

"Now," Terry interrupted El's thoughts. "Tell me about that creative writing class you're taking."

Before she could stop herself, El started to laugh, and if she sounded a little hysterical, well, it was because she was desperate.

"Oh," she said, struggling to catch her breath. "Oh, boy. It's going to shit."

And despite herself, Terry laughed too.

a/n: just fyi, the quote Shepherd keeps repeating is Nixon's. Thank you for reading and I'm waiting for your review ^^

8. peek-a-boo

Author's note: So, heh... I was like, maybe I can finish this chapter before my classes come back, and I was really believing I could do it. But then, for some unknown reason, I decided to watch ATLA on Netflix and found out that it'd be taken down within 6 days! And that's how I spent my last days of holidays binge watching Avatar instead of writing. And then classes were back and you know how it goes, constant pain and life crisis yada yada.

That takes us to the next topic that is: I know you guys already have to be patient with me because I'm taking so long to write each chapter, but now you have to be extra patient, okay? Because of my classes, yes, and work and stuff. I'll try to maintain the 15-20 days gap between chapters, but I can't guarantee you anything. I'm sorry :(Bear with me, guys, we're almost heading to the third and final part of the fic.

Finally, I would like to thank you all for your nice reviews and the patience and everything. Every like/favorite/kudos, every follow/ subscription, they mean a lot, you have no idea. Thank you. And I hope you leave a review here too.

And now to the chapter because yall have over 14k words ahead of you, heh

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7. peek-a-boo

October, 1986

Elle Hopper

First period was the best, because it was social studies with Dustin, Jenny and Will and because they were learning world history, which was pretty neat. El arrived early that Friday morning, because she had to prepare for the day that was to come. She had a really bad feeling about her kitten narrative – *Casper at the tomato forest* – and about anything English, to be frank.

She sat by Jennifer's side, in front of Dustin, and observed the teacher fold small pieces of papers and put them in a glass bowl while the class filled, everyone gradually finding their seats. El turned around to talk to her friends.

"Will is having a good day today," she informed them. Despite her brother's protests, it kind of became their thing to pass on reports about his health situation.

"That's great!" Jennifer exclaimed at the same time Dustin said "How can you tell?"

El looked at him with a raised eyebrow. She could always tell, because she knew things, but this went beyond her powers.

"When he's fine," she answered. "Everyone can tell."

As if on cue, Will strutted inside the classroom, sunglasses and leather jacket, hair in a bun, being charming and kind of loud.

"Good morning, Mrs. Xavier, aren't we looking good!"

Some people giggled and the teacher made a clear effort not to smile too.

"Mr. Byers, take the glasses off, and you're late."

Will did take off the glasses because above all he was a good student.

"All right, fine," he said and looked at his watch. "But –" Will paused dramatically for a few seconds, just enough for the bell to ring, and then he smiled. "I'm not late."

A freshman came in running, tripping on chairs as he desperately tried to get to his seat. Will pointed at him.

"He is."

"Very funny," the teacher said and offered the bowl to Will. "Now you're going to be the first."

"What's this?" he asked, already picking one of the folded papers.

"This," explained Mrs. Xavier. "Is how you'll sort your project for the regional social studies fair that will be held here at Hawkins High in December."

Jennifer's jaw dropped and some *Ohs* were exclaimed.

"We're hosting the regional?" Dustin asked a little too loud to be heard above the chatter. Jennifer smiled at him.

"Nerd," she said and El rolled her eyes.

"We are," Mrs. Xavier answered. "Thanks to some of our brightest students, like Mr. Byers here. Excellent GPA." Will beamed at her words. Show off. "And that's why you all better *excel at it!*"

She hit on the table with her fist, making everyone sit straighter, and El and Jenny exchanged a look. Jennifer mouthed '*no pressure*' and El replied '*at all*'. Will still was in front of the class.

"All right, nice pep talk, Mrs. X! Lemme handle this…"

He got the bowl and started passing it around the class. El got population control, Dustin got the easiest – Americas – and Jennifer got renewable sources. Will left his bag on his seat behind Jenny and continued passing the bowl around until he reached the it girls, as Jennifer liked to call them.

"What did you get, Will?" Ava Taylor asked. She was a cheerleader and her boyfriend was the quarterback, which apparently was the epitome of the *cliché*. Will checked his piece of paper.

"Oh," he said surprised. "Urban sustainability. Cool!"

All the girls desperately opened their papers and El and Jennifer avoided looking at one another, or they'd start to laugh. Ava sighed triumphantly.

"Me too!" she said. "Guess we'll be partners."

"Why is she so happy about it?" wondered El. "It's just a fair project."

"And an easy A," Dustin argued. "Like everything Will does."

"Plus, she gets to be the envy of her friends," Jenny argued. "Gotta know that everybody either wants to be with Will, or be Will."

"Creepy," El concluded.

"You know what's the worst part?" Dustin asked and El turned to look at him again. "No one gave a fuck about us in middle school! They just learned Will's name because he disappeared-slash-died in 7th grade. They kinda knew who Mike was only because Nancy dated Steve. But now the basketball team is fighting over Lucas and Will can date whoever he wants, this is crazy."

"Kids, come on!" Mrs. Xavier called, finally catching everyone's attention. Will had left the bowl on her table and was now sitting in his place. "The instructions about the project are on the board, make sure to copy them. You can discuss who you were paired with later. Now, class."

El was paired with one of the it girls too, Nora, and they agreed to talk about the project during lunch, because social studies was the only subject they had together. By the time third period started, El had almost forgotten that it was her #2 most hated subject of the day, but that didn't last long. The teacher already got started on giving back their kitten narratives and El held her breath.

By her side, Mike sighed in relief, so she peeked to see that he had gotten yet another A+. Stupid Mike with his brilliant mind, it was so annoying! Why did she surround herself with intelligent people? Certainly to feel bad about herself.

She was so deep in self-pity that El barely notice the sheet of paper that the teacher put on her table, and it took her a couple of seconds to process the grade on the top right corner. D+.

"Better, Ellie," Mr. Johnson told her. "But not quite there yet. I'd like to talk to you after class today, okay?"

El shrugged, eyes glued on the offensive grade she had gotten. So many hours watching her mother's cat play in the garden for what? She sucked so bad it was depressing. Also, she was feeling really lightheaded that morning and being self-aware did not help her feel

better. She fought the urge to crumple the essay in a ball, because she still had to ask Hopper to sign *another* failing grade, but she didn't fight the urge to storm off.

"El?" Mike hushed when she started shoving all her things in her bag. "You okay?"

She didn't answer; she didn't even look over at him. Mr. Johnson was finishing handing out the essays, and El put her backpack over her shoulder and simply got out of class, ignoring Mike and the teacher who were calling for her to go back. There was *no fucking way* she would go back inside that class, not now, not ever again. In fact, she was considering the very attractive idea of being homeschooled again. Hopper could certainly find her a tutor, couldn't he? And she'd have more time to dedicate to hockey and everything.

The inspector turned into the hall El was in and she had to quickly hide in the first restroom she found for a couple of minutes. At least it was the girls' restroom. She dropped her bag on the floor and washed her face in the sink. The tap water was cold and awakening. El looked at herself in the mirror.

"You're a fraud," she said to her reflection. Her light head started to turn into a headache and she lowered her head groaning, only it made things worse, so El got her bag and entered in one of the stalls, locking the door behind her.

She had to pee anyway, it'd be nice to sit down. She kicked her bag to the corner and unzipped her jeans wondering if that day could get any worse and *surprise!* Red stain on her panties. A little desperate, El checked all the pockets of her backpack just to find out that she didn't have any pads with her, and she was a hundred percent sure that there was none in her locker either.

Slowly and dramatically, El leaned back, eyes up to the roof of the girls' restroom.

"I fucking hate my life."

So she just sat there, toilet paper on her panties for almost half an hour before she assumed that it'd be safe to go to the infirmary

without having to go back to class after. She'd say that the cramps were killing her and she'd have them call her father. Sounded like a plan, and a good one. And the nurse was nice enough, she even gave El some options – pads or tampons? Advil or aspirin? Wanna lay down for a bit? But Hopper would only be able to go get her after lunch, which meant that she still had to go to her fourth period class (Spanish II), and the day was so not over yet.

The bell rang informing the end of third period and the halls filled with chatter and laughter. Her head still ached, but it was more like when you sit near an amp at a band's concert for too long, those waves of bother that sometimes hit you. El got out of the infirmary with her head low, trying not to blow from all frustration. She had practice tomorrow, and a game on Sunday, so she and Jennifer would stay with Mrs. Hayes at a hotel in Dayton; she had to focus on that even if it felt like everyone was talking about her.

"Ellie Hopper!" a girl called and El flinched. She looked up and saw Preston Telles with her minions standing in the middle of the hall holding something. Oh, God, she didn't have time for this shit. "I was wondering if we'd find you."

The Ps laughed. El wondered if they wanted to be congratulated for the accomplishment.

"School isn't that big," she replied instead. They had a bit of a crowd watching. Maybe El shouldn't have pushed Preston in a puddle during rugby at the class tournament, now everyone was constantly waiting for a comeback.

"*Yeah*, and news travel fast," the leader of the Ps said with that slow, sweetened voice of hers that made El want to explode her eye sockets when she was in one of her bad days, which was the case. "She doesn't look so tough with all her failures out and about, does she, Phyl?"

Phyllis shook her head no and giggled, and El narrowed her eyes, looking around. There was paper glued all around the corridor, on almost every locker, but so what? But then, Peyton took the paper Preston was holding and started to read.

"*The curious case of the slug in the tub*, by Elle J. Hopper," the redhead read and suddenly all the air left the room, at least for El.

"Peyton, come on," El heard someone say, but she couldn't focus on anyone right now, all she could do was breathe and sort through all the many, *many* ways she could kill each and every one of those people who were laughing at the Ps little stunt – laughing at *her*.

"Ellie," Mike said, suddenly in front of her, blocking her view of the corridor.

"Get out," she said, but he didn't move away, he just touched her arm. El looked up at him. "Mike, I swear to fucking God-"

"*Don't you dare*," he said firmly, knowing damn well what she would do, shoving him away with her mind like she did when he was in her way. "El, come on, you know you can't harm those people. It's just a prank."

Unbe-fucking-lievable.

"You know I can do anything," she replied through gritted teeth and Mike sighed exasperated.

"But you mustn't!" he said again, making her frown. She shook her head briefly, realizing what he was doing.

Whenever she started to slip out of control, Mike would say something that she didn't quite comprehend, just to induce her to think of something else. Peyton was reading louder now.

"Ellie, come on," Mike cupped her cheek with his other hand. "You're better."

She wasn't. She was the worst, and the only thing she was good at was killing, like Papa taught her not so long ago. That was something she could do effortlessly. Mike stepped closer. He was so tall she couldn't even look over his shoulder to direct her rage at those Ps.

"Babe, please. Breathe."

El frowned. Mike hadn't called her 'babe' in a really long time and for

very good reasons. Last time she could remember was Valentine's Day, when he asked if she wanted butter on her popcorn. He didn't call her 'babe' anymore because she wasn't. His. She looked up at him.

"Mike," she said. And everything went black.

As soon as she opened her eyes again, El immediately knew what had happened, and she sat up so fast she startled whoever was holding her.

"Where is Will?" she asked furiously. "I *told* him not to mess with me."

"How could Will mess with you?" Mike asked and she looked at him. He was frowning. "You're terrifying."

She was silent for a moment, wondering if that was a joke, but maybe not… maybe…

"You seriously don't know yet?" El asked, bringing down her guard.

"Know about what?" Mike asked, the lines between his eyebrows getting deeper. El shook her head dismissing it. Not her secret to tell.

Finally, she looked around. They were in the girls' locker room, clearly, because it smelled of shampoo and perfume. Someone had carried El there, probably Mike, and laid her on one of the benches between lockers. Both her and his bags were on the floor.

"You know," Mike commented. "For some reason I never thought that the girls' locker room would be so normal."

El breathed out a laugh and shook her head again, avoiding looking at him. She never used this roll of lockers, always the one two halls down, but she understood why he chose this. It was more hidden than the others, furthest from the door and the showers.

"What class are you missing?" El asked, still not looking at Mike. They didn't compare schedule sheets this year like they did the year before.

"Chemistry," he answered. "But it's cool. I know everything about organic nomenclature."

El hummed. So did she. It was actually the coolest part of chemistry, if someone asked her opinion. Of course she didn't know *that much* about the subject, but out of everything she saw, that was the coolest.

"How long was I out?"

"Just a few minutes," Mike told her. "Are you feeling alright? I have some chocolate."

"I'm fine, it was just Will," El cut him and Mike tilted his head.

"I'm have a feeling we need a better explanation here," he said and El closed her mouth.

"You know what," she said, changing her mind. "I think I deserve that chocolate."

"For not killing everyone?" Mike added. "I agree."

El rolled her eyes and then watched his hands as he searched for the chocolate in his backpack. He got out a bar of Milka that got her salivating and she caught it with both hands almost desperately.

"You know me so well!" El exclaimed, unwrapping the chocolate and taking a bite.

"Almost too well," Mike replied, and finally she looked at him again with narrowed eyes. "I've been carrying this since yesterday."

Her mouth opened slightly in a silent "*oh*". Yeah. Almost too well.

"I can't believe you still remember," she commented and Mike shrugged.

"Old habits, they die hard," he told her, and she supposed it was true. If anything, she was proof. "It was really fucked up, what the Ps did," he said sympathetically and El nodded.

"How did they even find out about it? I didn't tell anyone about my grades!" she speculated with her mouth full.

"I don't know," Mike answered. "But I want to know how you

managed to make that paper tornado thing being unconscious."

El frowned.

"What?"

"The tornado with all the copies of your works that attacked the Ps, how did you do that?" he insisted and El shook her head.

"I didn't," she told him frankly, and Mike frowned. He opened his mouth to say something, but then they heard the door opening and closing loudly. None of them moved.

"Ellie?" Will called, allowing them to breathe.

"Over here," she replied. Just a few steps and Will was there, dried blood on his upper lip. He looked drained, but better than when he got one of his migraine episodes.

"Dad's here to get you," he told her and she got up, got her backpack. He looked at Mike. "Thanks, man."

"It's fine," Mike replied, narrowed eyes observing Will. El pointed at her own lip.

"You've got some…" she said and Will tried to clean it, but the blood was already dry.

"How're you feeling?" he asked. El shrugged.

"I'm fine," she told him and then hit his chest with her fist. "Don't ever do that again!"

"Ouch! Ma'am, yes ma'am," Will replied, rubbing the place she had punched him. "Look, go home, take some painkillers and have some sleep, okay? Dustin said he's finally authorized to enter the closed section of the museum and we are going there after school."

Oh, that was new information! Finally, indeed. He'd been trying to get clearance for almost two months already.

"Wait, how do you know too?" asked El, aware that she was focusing

on the wrong part, and then taking another bite of her chocolate. Will rolled his eyes.

"Hopper told me. *Go get your sister, she's got the period blues*," he mimicked, making Mike choke in a laugh. It was a really good impersonation though, she had to give him that. "Now let's go, 'cause we have to go back to class; and don't think about the Ps. We'll get back at them, sis."

That was why she loved Will so much, he was passionate. He always gave a hundred and ten percent to the things he cared about, and she knew she could count on him. That was why she had to find a way to help him. She couldn't lose him.

El put her backpack on her back, and then looked at Mike, silently thanking him for everything, and knowing that she could count on him too, at least with school things. Maybe it was time to put pride aside and finally accept the help he offered at the beginning of the school year, because he really knew her well – meaning that he knew she'd have trouble with two English subjects. El made a mental note to talk to him later.

Will offered her his arm and she accepted it, they both left the locker room first and they even stopped at one of the water fountains to clean him up.

"Maybe you should go home too," El suggested, watching Will wet his hand and rub his fingers on his mouth. He shrugged.

"Nah, it's cool," he assured her. "I already missed a lot of classes because of the migraines. I have to keep my grades up."

"Doesn't it feel… useless sometimes?" El asked struggling to find the right words to explain how she felt about school. Will smiled.

"You're only saying that because you're having an episode, you don't really mean it."

El chuckled.

"*An episode*?" she echoed and Will giggled too. "Shut up."

"Come on, sis, I know you like to learn. You just need to relax a little. For real," he insisted and she shook her head. "Loosen up a little, find yourself a guy – *or girl* – who'll make you feel something."

"William," El elbowed him.

"Elle," he replied in the same tone. "You know, Pat Curry was trying to stop Peyton today. I think he has a soft spot for you."

"You think, huh?" she said and Will smiled.

"It's actually kinda obvious, *but you insist on hanging on to your ex!*"

"I'm not!" El protested and Will raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, yeah? Can I take that box to Mike's then? I'm going to his place tonight."

El didn't reply, which apparently was a good enough answer for Will. Her chocolate was gone and she threw the wrapper in the nearest trash can without a word.

"Can you spare me of this conversation today?" she asked and Will sighed. El had this theory that no one could resist her look-at-me-I'm-a-lost-puppy expression, and not even her brother was immune to it. "What is the paper tornado thing that Mike was telling me about?"

"Ah!" Will smiled. "Have you ever been paper cut?" El nodded. "How's it feel?"

"Stings like a bitch," she answered right away and his smile widened.

"Imagine it a hundred times," he said and El slowed down. He turned to look at her and she was smiling.

"You," she said holding his arm. "Are an evil genius and I love you."

"I know, right?" he replied proud of himself.

They were in front of the secretary's office and when the door opened revealing a worried and sick Hop, it also showed all the Ps annoyingly tending to their practically invisible cuts. El bit down the

triumphant smile and put on her best daddy's girl front.

"Daddy!" she cried, crashing on Hopper's chest.

"Oh, Ellie, how are you feeling? Do you want to fill a complaint?"

She sighed dramatically, her face hidden from the others.

"I think so, dad," she answered. "What's that law you told me about, when someone says and does things to humiliate you?"

"Systemic intimidation?" Hopper said, turning to the people in the room. The principal was at his office door watching everything with wide, concerned eyes. "I think it does apply in this situation, baby, I'm taking you to the station to fill in a complaint before we go home."

The principal stepped in.

"Chief Hopper, I don't think that's necessary-" he began, but Hop had this way of looking so big when he was angry, and it entertained El.

"Are you kidding me, Buster?" he said with his thunderous voice. "These girls have been terrorizing my daughter since her first day of school *last year*! They've accused her of the most absurd things, from causing tampon leaks to creating soil erosion to destroy a car? Look at her, Buster, she's five foot tall! She's just a girl minding her own business and being attacked over and over for it! Buster, I hope you have a really good solution for this little… "P squad" here or heavens knows we'll start suing people and *you bet* Hawkins High will be on that list."

El looked back at Will, who was still there watching everything and barely containing himself from laughing, which was a mistake, because it made her want to laugh too.

"You got all your things, kiddo?" Hop asked and El nodded. "Then let's go."

He stormed off, one arm around El's shoulders, and after they were out of the principal's sight, Hop looked at El and then Will.

"You really are my children, huh?" he said smiling, his other hand shaking Will's shoulder playfully. "Go to class, kid, you already missed too many. And you," he turned to El. "Ice cream?"

"Yes, please!" she agreed. "But also, can I really file a complaint against the Ps?"

Hopper shrugged.

"No one can prove you did anything they say you did, so I don't see why you couldn't," he said. El marveled on the option. Maybe that day wasn't so ruined. "But a paper tornado, kiddo, that was brilliant."

"Oh, no, that wasn't me," El corrected. "That was Will."

"Really?" Hopper exclaimed impressed.

"Yeah, he knocked me down," she told him as they left the building.

"*How?*"

Hopper was oscillating between pride and worry there. El shrugged.

"I don't know, it *felt* like he had pulled at my strings. You know?"

"You know I don't," he replied. They entered in the Chief's truck. "You kids scare me."

Yeah, she knew. They got their ice creams – El's peanut butter with chocolate and waffles, Hopper's strawberry and cream -, and took some more home – cookies and cream for Joyce, mint and chocolate for Will -, and after some painkillers, El was left alone at home, because Hop had to go back to the station. With the company of her dogs, El prepared a warm bath to ease her wobbly legs, and even took a nap in the tub.

It was a sunny day, but also kind of cold already and El got in that tub thinking about Will's words, of how she should relax. She wasn't getting back with Mike, that was a fact, and she also wasn't so sure she wanted to find someone else. El had no idea how Will transitioned from one fling to another so naturally, she had a hard time liking people enough to let them kiss her!

Maybe what she really needed was to be alone. How did Nancy put it? Get to understand her body better and such. Not that she didn't know it well, curiosity had put El in some interesting positions already, but what was the harm in trying, *really trying* to be single and okay with it, right?

So she slept in the tub, it was cold outside, and she woke up to cold water and Bark licking her fingers, but she felt really warm. All because of a dream. Feeling the blood rushing to her cheeks, El sat up in the tub. Bark was sitting by her side and Molly was sleeping on the floor. She petted Bark's head.

"These days are so weird, boy," she confessed frowning. "So very moody."

Still sleepy, El got out of the tub and put on some comfortable clothes. There wasn't pain anymore, but the cramps were still uncomfortable, so she got a hot bag and went to Hop and Joyce's room to lie down, because their bed was bigger and the dogs could sleep with her. She set the alarm for 2:30, got the copy of *Animal Farm* she had gotten from Jonathan's shelf and read until she fell asleep hoping that the idea of fascist pigs would distract her.

The humidity of the bedroom elevated as El slept, damping her skin. It was as if her body was really warm in a cold environment, and in the back of her mind she thought that maybe it was the hot bag on her stomach, or the dogs on the bed. It was hard to breathe there, and for a long time she couldn't understand where she was until the lights blinked revealing one of the the long and dusty corridors of the labs.

Dread sent a shiver all over El's body. That place still terrified her, she didn't have happy memories there at all and she wanted to *leave*. The air was thick and the floor slippery. It smelled of death, that was the only way she could describe it, with the walls peeling as pieces of the massive breech that grew in there deteriorated.

She had to get to the elevator to go downstairs and leave, and after she had that thought it was like the corridor extended for miles, with the door to the elevator at the very end. Unwilling to stay there, El started to run towards the yellowing doors that would lead her far

from there, grateful for all the cardio she got used to doing since she went to that camp. The lights flickered and she prayed to whoever was listening that the elevator would be working, because she didn't know where the emergency stairs were – even if it was the route she had taken years ago when she ran away from that place, because she had blocked the details of those terrible years.

El reached the doors of the elevator and hit the button a few times, desperate to leave, desperate for air. Relief came upon her when she heard the sound of the machine working, indicating that it still was functional. The seconds stretched, making her heart tighten in her chest with the wait. El hit the button again, as if it would urge the doors to open.

There was a crack that made her step back, and then the two halves started to separate revealing other doors behind it, also opening. For some reason, El only remembered that elevators were self-contained repression boxes when she already was about to step in, but usually she had someone with her to hold her hand. Not this time, not here. Not in the place that haunted her dreams when she wasn't protecting herself.

She swallowed and waited. To leave that building was more important than to fear it. To stay away was priority. The doors opened enough for her to step in, so El rushed inside and hit the closing button before anything else. The walls of the elevator were slicky and differently from the corridor, it smelled of fresh blood, like-

The doors closed, but El was paralyzed, fingers inches from hitting the ground floor button and a shiver went all over her body. The smell, it was just like Shepherd. Something thick dropped on her right shoulder and slowly El looked up, afraid of what she'd see. It was silent and wet in there. Not humid, as she first thought, wet. Thick and putrid. It was alive. Someone. Their upper body almost completely out of their oddly placed cocoon.

Something fell from the cocoon as the person, a man, slipped out of it and El jumped back, eyes quickly processing that it was the identification card of one of the DOE's scientists. She wanted to see him get out of that thing, but she also wanted to know who he was,

so she flipped the card over. For some reason, she thought that her powers wouldn't work here, but they did, and she read his name. Dexter. She remembered Papa talking about him, but she had no recollection of him.

Had he been the first? Was this happening now or was it just a memory? Why did he take longer to change?

His hand touched her shoulder and El's body reacted at the spot. She screamed on the top of her lungs and woke up with a jolt, bolting up tangled on the covers of the bed, both dogs jumping from the bed in alert mode. It took her a lot of breathing to set her mind straight again, and when she looked at the clock it still was a few minutes from 2:30.

El checked her hands and arms and hair, but all she found was her own sweat, no disgusting goo from a disgusting incubator on top of an elevator. She still felt dirty, though, and what started with her going to wash her hands turned into another shower. She even washed her hair again, letting the hot water carry away any memory of the terrible nightmare she just had.

Forty minutes later, after another Advil and after many small bites on a sandwich she only made because she really had to eat something, El put on some warm clothes and her favorite pair of boots, got her keys and Will's bike, locked everything and headed to the museum. At some point, the clouds started to pile up in the sky, covering the sun and threatening to bring down the rain. She hoped it'd wait until everyone was safe and sound at home first.

It still was too early for the boys to get there, so El paid the ticket to the photography exhibit. Between hockey tryouts, practices and games, not that many birthdays had come her way lately, and she was quickly running out of money. Maybe she would have to find herself a real job to keep helping at home, and with her busy schedule she had no idea who would want to hire her.

The AC was on in the building, but El took off her jacket anyway. She was wearing many layers for a just kind-of-cold day, but her hair was wet on her back and her body didn't really know what it was doing. Nancy confided to her that the first day was always the worst and

there wasn't a month in her life that El didn't agree.

She bought a Coke and sat in front of one of Mapplethorpe's pictures, one of the less polemic ones. Jonathan had brought her here once and told her about this whole political movement that was going on in the art community with the sexuality issues and AIDS problem that was spreading worldwide. He told her about how these pictures were bold and important and what they meant for society, even if society didn't fully comprehend the disease yet.

El sat there for a long time. It was Friday, and so the museum had a little more movement than a normal week day, but it still was pretty quiet. Lucas once told her that he didn't understand how people could just observe the same art for hours and hours, he didn't understand what else there was to see after you saw a frame, but whenever she came with her brothers, they could just sit and find meanings for days.

"Don't you love how it doesn't need colors to pass this… wisdom?" Mike asked after he sat by her side. El smiled, her empty can in her hands, legs crossed on the bench. "It ages us."

She hummed. That was precisely how she felt.

El looked at Mike and he looked at her too, both of them smiling. She wondered if she'd ever have this kind of connection with anyone else, and then she wondered if she'd need to. Will didn't seem to need that to hook up with anyone and he was doing just fine.

"You look fine, how are you feeling?" he asked and she shrugged.

"Chilling," she answered just in time to see Mike take another chocolate bar from his backpack. Her eyes shone and her smile widened. "I'm definitely better!"

Mike chuckled.

"Now, think about the silver lining here, you won't have to worry about that in a couple of weeks," Mike pointed out and El frowned as she unwrapped her chocolate. "I mean, you *are* going to be Princess Leia."

El laughed and so did Mike.

"At least Holly picked *Return of the Jedi*," El told him. "Where clothes aren't, you know, white."

Mike pointed at her.

"'Specially if we don't know where the hell the seniors are planning on having the party," he said and she nodded. "I heard they wanted to use last year's haunted house, but they didn't get a deal on rent fast enough and Preston was *pissed*."

El shrugged.

"I hope she burns in hell," she said coldly. "If hell is really a thing, which I chose to believe it is. Don't tell Father Boris I said that."

Mike opened his mouth to say something, but they got interrupted.

"Hey, love birds!" Lucas called, making them turn around to see him. "We don't have much time, let's go."

Dustin was at the door at the end of the hall swinging a set of keys on his fingers and Will looked anxious. It took El just one look at him to know that he'd seen it too, and when their eyes crossed, he nodded.

"Was he bothering you, sis?" Will provoked as usual and Mike rolled his eyes.

"Nah, he's just cheering me up," El answered awkwardly elbowing Mike because she was holding the chocolate with both hands, the can of Coke under her arm. "And making me fat."

The way she bit on that bar made sure that she didn't care about gaining weight. Will scoffed.

"As if you won't burn it all tomorrow," he commented.

They were crossing a bright corridor with more neo-expressionism pictures, and then Dustin turned in a "staff only" entry where the air was surprisingly colder. El dumped the empty can in the nearest trash can and handed her chocolate to Will so she could put her jacket

back on; she ran her fingers through her hair hoping that it'd dry faster. She had decided to only cut it after Halloween, because she needed longer hair to be Leia. And then they stopped in front of an elevator and both Will and El stepped back.

"Where are the stairs?" Will asked. Dustin, who had hit the up button, looked at them frowning.

"It's the fourth floor," he said, as if it answered anything. "Stairs are just to the left."

Dustin pointed and the siblings nodded at the same time, Will handing the chocolate to El.

"We're taking it," he said decisively and they both kept going through the corridor.

"Guys, there's enough space for all of us!" Dustin insisted, but they didn't turn around.

"Good exercise, boys!" El replied, even though everyone was pretty sure it had nothing to do with keeping fit.

She hated elevators, they all knew, but she had never avoided one when they were with her. She guessed that they were surprised by Will avoiding it too.

"What did you see?" El asked as they went up and up.

"Dexter, he came out late," Will answered. "It didn't know exactly what it was doing when it got him."

See, that was something El didn't catch in her dream. Those types of details were hidden from her.

"The DOE…" Will wondered, working hard to keep his breathing even with the stairs and the talking. "It seems like they barely use the building anymore, but there's still movement there sometimes, did you notice?"

El nodded. That was why she avoided the place when she was away, besides the terrible memories she had made there. It wasn't safe in

any dimension. They passed by the third floor.

"You think they know what's happening in their own building?"

"No," El answered. Because *that* was something she knew. "The Vale of Shadows terrified them for good, I don't think they ever went to the third level ever again. It looks abandoned."

They said nothing for a long time, a lot of hectic thoughts going through El's head. She was sure that her mind held answers to questions she still didn't how to make.

Those stairs were longer than they imagined. By the time they hit the last set of steps, they were out of breath and Will looked really pale. Maybe they should've had swallowed down their fear after he used his powers like that and taken the elevators, but the memory was too fresh for them to shake off. Mike, Dustin and Lucas were waiting at the top of the stairs.

"See?" Will said cocky. "Just added another year in my life and you guys didn't."

"Shut up, Byers," Lucas replied, arms crossed. "You're spending way too much time with the weirdo, you know?"

El gave him the tongue and Will gave him the finger, proving their skilled sibling synchronism.

There was a staff room on that floor where they drank some water and found some crackers to eat. Half of the level was being used for the kids' project the museum had, where it taught children about the history and evolution of earth. El had been there many times while homeschooled in order to learn about earth science in a practical way, and it was her favorite part of the whole building. When Dustin first got his job, it was to stay here, touring the kids, but he was so smart that they quickly transferred him to the paleontology exhibit on level 2.

They crossed an easel that announced that half of the building was closed for visits and stopped in front of heavy and tall wooden doors. El expected something imposing and spooky, but actually the entry

was very elegant, which seemed out of place. If what was inside really looked like Will's pictures, something was clearly off.

"Mr. Androutsos said that they would discontinue this exhibit after a few months, but then some things were stolen and they opened an investigation that never ends," Dustin explained as he unlocked the doors. They followed him inside. "There's no record in the police because the owner of the exhibit wanted to keep it an internal investigation and stuff. Anyway."

He found the light switch and the whole room illuminated. The roof seemed to be so far up, making El understand why the stairs were so long. Art and history, they needed space.

The first thing right in front of them was a plaque, and they all gathered around it.

"*The exotic history of Indiana*," Mike read. "*Was idealized by Romani historian Nicholas Heron, whose eerie work gathered during the sixties tells the history of the small towns of Indiana with their almost supernatural background of mythological beings mixed with what we all know from the libraries.*"

"*Features artifacts from Crown Point, Delphi,*" Will continued reading. "*Hawkins, Richmond and Zionsville.*"

El hummed and the boys looked at her.

"What?" Lucas asked.

"I'm just thinking," she replied. "Is Mr. Heron the owner for the exhibit?"

Dustin shrugged.

"I don't think Mr. Antroutsos told me the name of the owner, but I can ask. Why?"

"I don't know," El told him frowning. "I'm just thinking."

The boys exchanged a look and then shrugged. They were past trying to understand her.

"So?" she said, focusing on the matter at hand. "Do we start from Hawkins or we follow the tour?"

"How do you know there's a tour?" Dustin asked and El pointed to their left where there was a 'Start tour' plaque. They all looked. "Oh. Right."

"I don't know," Mike shrugged. "Whatever, I guess?"

Will rolled his eyes.

"The fuck with whatever," he said passing by them. "I want to start with Zionsville."

"*Why?*" they asked at the same time.

"'Cause I like the fucking name, that's why," Will replied already halfway through the room. He stopped when he saw no one was following him and turned to face them. "Well? We don't have much time. Chop chop."

Shaking their heads, the boys followed Will and El was going with them, but something caught her attention in the corner of her eye. To her right, Crown Point's section had a tall figure behind a glass. It was an over six feet tall skeleton of something not quite human, and El stepped closer to read the plaque.

During the 1950's, it read, *Crown Point's locals reported the presence of a faceless man in the outskirts of the town. Farmers assured that it was responsible for the death of their cattle and destruction of their crops. After many searches, police and townspeople gave up on searching for the faceless humanoid, sure that it had been scared to somewhere else, but in 1968, the youngest of the Flint's household found the skeleton of the dead creature inside a cave in the family's property.*

El looked up at the skeleton again, taking in its predator-like posture. The demogorgon. She swallowed.

"Guys?" she called and looked over to where the boys were standing.

Lucas looked at her and gestured for her to come closer. She passed by pictures of dark landscapes and bloody settings, and she found out

that it wasn't the first time Hawkins had a creepy cocoon in its limits, as the conserved and dusty model the boys were staring at told them.

El made space between the boys to stand next to Will and she held his hand. That was what he was terrified of – the change. That was what they had to avoid.

"You know what, I remember Max's brother worked here at the time," Lucas suddenly said, his voice echoing in the tall room.

"You mean in this exhibit?" Mike asked and Dustin checked his right hand, where he had scribed something.

"Billy was on the staff list Mr. Antroutsos gave me," he said. "He and four other people are being investigated, but they have nothing on them so far."

"Are you sure they looked him up?" Mike asked. "I mean, he's terrifying, there's a big chance of people just wanting to stay away from him, right?"

Lucas shuddered. Dustin shook his head.

"You think he's got something?" he speculated and Mike shrugged.

"I mean, he did take the body of the displacer to "study" and never gave it back, even after Hopper drilled him about evidence."

El had no idea who Billy was, she wasn't around when he was here, but she heard the stories and from them she imagined that he would get along fine with Papa. Suddenly, something clicked in her mind and she held Will's hand tighter.

"You said he studied the displacer that attacked Will?" she asked turning to the other boys. They nodded, taken aback by her sudden intensity. "Do you think he saved any venom? I mean, that's the kind of things you'd study, right?"

"We have no idea, El," Dustin said. "I mean, yes, a scientist would study those things, but Billy? He was crazy. And not in a Bruce Banner kind of crazy, more like a Lex Luthor madness."

"Still is," Lucas observed, and they all looked at him, even Will. "Just getting madder after the attack, Max says."

"What is Max still doing with him?" Dustin complained annoyed, and Lucas seemed pissed.

"She has nowhere to go!"

"Of course she does!" Dustin argued. "She can come here."

"It's not that simple, and you know that," Lucas replied. That argument was getting loud pretty fast. "Besides, why the fuck you care? I'm the only one who still talks to her."

Mike groaned.

"Here we go again," he mumbled and Lucas and Dustin turned to him at the same time.

"*WHAT?*"

Sensing a massive storm on the way and not only outside, El stepped further and stood between the two friends. She turned to Lucas.

"Can you ask her for me? If her brother has the venom?"

"Why do you need displacer venom in the first place?" Lucas asked and El swallowed.

"For me," Will said and they all looked at him. "I need it to stop getting sick."

"What?" Mike asked frowned.

"It's a theory," El rushed to explain.

"A good one," Will argued. She continued.

"He was sick before, got hit by the displacer, and got well. Now the venom is wearing off and he's getting sick again."

Mike seemed concerned.

"That's a long shot," he said. El nodded.

"It's the only shot we have. If Will is healthy enough, we can find a way to stop it forever." She turned to Lucas again. "That's why I need you to ask Max. Can you do that?"

Lucas nodded soberly and finally El could breathe. She looked at Will, who was breathing too, some color in his cheeks for a change.

"Thank you, Lucas," she said, a hand on his arm. He wasn't looking at her, though, his eyes were on Will, and he nodded again.

"Now," Dustin interrupted the moment. "Who's going to explain what the fuck is '*it*' that you're talking about?"

El and Will exchanged a look and she smiled, encouraging him. He took a deep breath.

"Maybe we should go somewhere else, talk over pizza," he suggested and they agreed.

[...]

Will Byers

"Have you ever felt like you're running out of time?" Will wondered out loud. He was on the floor of the Wheelers' second floor corridor because the girls kicked him out of Holly's room to get ready. "Like you have this real palpable notion that life is too short?"

No one answered him and he occupied himself with tying his boots. He was wearing black pants and a long sleeved black shirt like Luke Skywalker's in *Return of the Jedi*, and Mrs. Wheeler made his and El's camouflage poncho and hat from scratch with the fabric they bought. Now, Lexi promised Hol that she'd help her with the Yoda make up and apparently the final result was supposed to be a surprise. They had no idea what could be done besides green paint and fake pointy ears. Seriously, why would Holly want to be Yoda out of all characters in *Star Wars*? He was awesome, okay, but Hol was a beautiful little blond girl, it didn't make much sense.

Will shook his head. He supposed that was why Mike was always

talking about his little sister dominating the world – she was known for thinking outside the box since she learned how to speak her mind.

"They say that cats have nine lives, that's why they have this invincible posture, but what about humans?" he continued. "I mean, I died once and almost died a second time… what if I'm running out of lives?"

"You're not a cat, Will," El said joining him in the corridor. She sat across from him and she had all her costume on, with the belt and everything. Will frowned. El was looking *a lot* like Carrie Fisher. Were white people really all alike?

"Yeah, darling," added Karen showing up in the corridor too. She was holding Callie, who'd go trick or treating with them. "And you're being a little morbid today, aren't you?"

"I guess it's the *Víspera de Todos los Santos*," he shrugged.

Mrs. Wheeler shook her head and smiled.

"Are you guys sure you want to take Callie with you?" she asked. "This is a lot of work, and your mom will be here soon. I can stay with the baby."

"Nah, we'll be fine," El assured. Their mom was at home finishing packing her and Callie's things, because they'd drive to Kentucky tonight to visit the grandparents. "It's good to introduce her to the holiday soon, and it'll only take a little over an hour anyway."

"Besides," added Will. "They will be away for 3 days, we gotta make the best of our time."

"Okay," Karen said, even though they could tell she didn't fully agree. "Then I have something for her too! Wait here."

She disappeared back in her room and Will looked at El. It wasn't like they were going to go anywhere, not now, not without Holly. He looked down at his arms, the poncho and black glove waiting to be used on his lap. Will couldn't believe that he was invited for Holly's Halloween, for a while he thought that she was afraid of him; but the past year she'd been talking to him instead of hiding behind her

siblings or parents when he arrived.

He frowned. If he was to be fair, none of the Wheelers would ever allow him to set foot in their house again, and it wasn't because he broke Mike's nose last spring (it was because of another time, not so long ago, when things were different and dangerous for him and those around him). He'd been lucky, but now things were different and dangerous again.

Will Byers knew he was running out of time.

"Will?" El called and he looked at her. She seemed worried. "Can we not beat ourselves up today?" she asked. By '*we*' she meant '*you*'. Him. He nodded and crossed his legs Indian style.

"Yeah, I think I can," he replied. Even though he knew it would not be easy.

Karen showed up by the door again with a big smile on her face, Callie in her arms, and El pretty much screamed, covering her mouth just in time to stop herself. She got up in a jump and then Will looked up.

"Oh, my God!" El exclaimed, eyes shining. She was doing this little dance that was quite funny, all because Callie was now wearing an onesie that was nothing less than a Ewok costume. And he had to admit, it was too darn cute. "Will, look at her! Oh, my God it's so cute, I'm gonna die!"

Will chuckled and Callie looked from El to him. She seemed comfortable in her little costume.

"Now, who's being morbid?" he joked, even though each time he looked at Callie's tiny face with those Ewok ears and the enchanted toothless smile she offered them, he felt something in his chest that made him think that the cuteness would end him too.

"Mrs. Wheeler, you're the best!" El said taking Callie from Karen's arms. The stroller was downstairs waiting for them.

"It was Holly's idea," the woman replied at the exact moment the door to Holly's room opened, revealing a sweaty, but satisfied Lexi.

There was a green streak from her eyebrow to her cheek.

"Okay, that was harder than I thought, but!" she emphasized the '*but*'. "I made it work. So I present to you: Master Yoda."

Lexi stepped to the side and behind her was Holly. The sight made everyone gasp, because she clearly was the best Yoda version they'd ever seen. Her skin was this light shade of green as well as her hair, and instead of false ears, somehow Lexi had managed to make the ears and the whole head effect with Holly's own hair. It was awesome.

"Alessandra!" Karen exclaimed, hands on her cheeks. "You're…"

"A genius," Holly added proudly. "I could never come up with something like this." She touched her hair with caution and quickly dropped her hand, probably afraid to mess it up.

"Oh, it's nothing," Lexi shrugged it off. "Nothing is toxic, by the way," she assured. "I used the same products for makeup and fixation that my cousin and I used in gymnastics."

"Paula's a gymnast too?" Will asked. He remembered Jonathan saying that the Solaris had hired him to photograph their daughter's performance, but he always assumed it was Lexi's parents.

"Well, she started with synchronized swimming, and I started with rhythmic gymnastics," Lexi explained. "But when Hawkins ballet school closed, I just kept with gym and she had to join a team in Indianapolis."

They all nodded and Callie tried to reach for El's hat. Will put the glove on his right hand and then the poncho. Lexi avoided looking at him.

"Are we going or not?" asked Holly, interrupting the awkward silence.

"Yes, we are!" Will replied. "Did you put my hat somewhere safe?" The little girl ran inside her room and got the hat from her bed, and then ran back to the corridor and handed him the last piece of his costume. "The map?"

"Here!" Holly took a folded paper from a hidden pocket in her costume. She had drawn the map of Hawkins' best Halloween points alone, with the sequence they'd have to follow, starting at the accountancy office Mr. Wheeler and Mike worked in. Apparently, they'd have some Swiss chocolate, or so did Ted say.

"The bucket?" Karen asked. Holly reached right inside the room, by the door, and came back with a cane where her bucket was docked.

"Awesome," El sighed. "Hol, this is better than last year."

"You think?" Holly asked with her eyes shining. It looked like even confident people needed validation .

"Are you kidding me?" El replied. Lexi cleaned her throat.

"Uh… I'm going home. I need to Uhura up, you know?"

"Oh, did you find the wig?" El asked and Lexi shook her head.

"I'll figure something out," she guaranteed and winked.

"We'll walk you," Will offered. "Your house is on the way anyway, if I'm reading this map correct."

"You are," Holly said nodding seriously.

Off they went, then, leaving Karen to get ready. Holly told them that her father would be Chewbacca and her mother would be Mon Mothma. She told them that her friends always chose boring costumes, like pirates and princesses, and argued about how that was such a waste because Halloween was when they could be *anything*. Lexi started to make a case about how people had different dreams and wishes and how it influenced their costume decisions, but they already were near her house, and Holly asked-

"Why did you choose Commander Uhura, Lexi?"

"Because she's a badass," Lexi replied in a heartbeat, and Holly considered her case closed. Maybe it was too soon to explain to a seven year old about how individuality worked.

They took turns pushing Callie's stroller during the 15 minute walk to get to Mike's work so they could get started on that trick or treating thing.

Last time Will trick or treated was… odd. Like they were a little too old or too wise to be doing that, but they were finally old enough to go from house to house later in the evening and all the little kids already had gotten their candies, which meant that Mike could get back into his Ghostbusters costume and ride with them, and they were ready to have fun.

They didn't have much fun in 1984, for many different reasons.

"Wow!" Will exclaimed as soon as he pushed the door to the office open, stopping on his tracks. "Holy fucking shit, it's Power Girl!"

Behind the reception desk, Spencer Hall smiled and waved a hello at them. Despite being already a blond, she had put on a short wig closer to Kara Zor-L's color. She was wearing the white uniform pretty similar to the comics and she looked fancy and just the part.

"Hi there, Jedi twins," she greeted.

"Trick or treat!" Holly shouted, coming from behind Will and interrupting any chance of conversation they could start, because quite frankly her Yoda costume was catching everyone's attention for its originality.

"Oh, my God!" Spencer exclaimed getting up. "Holly, this is so cool!"

"To one's chocolate treats one must take me," Holly replied, making Will chuckle.

"Yes, ma'am," Spencer said right away and she pointed to a desk in the middle of the room where there were many bowls of different candies and Holly practically ran there.

Will followed her, afraid she'd trip or turn over the table. For every couple of candies he put in Hol's bucket, he put one in his pocket; every time he did that, the little girl laughed, and every time she laughed, he shushed her as if it was their secret.

Ted Wheeler showed up to greet his daughter and tell her that he'd be going home soon, and Will looked back at the reception desk. Spencer had kneeled by the stroller and was beaming at Callie while El stood a couple of feet behind her, arms crossed and a blank expression on her face. She probably sensed that he was staring, because she looked at him and Will smiled as if telling her to smile too. After a second too late, El sighed and opened the smaller of the smiles.

"Where's Mike, daddy?" Holly asked just when Mike showed up, coming from the room Will knew was the office he shared with his father.

"I'm right here," Mike said and when he laid eyes on Holly, his face brightened. "This. Is. Awesome."

Holly smiled too, and she even did a little spin to show him her costume.

"It is!" she said, jumping a little. "You ready to go, big brother?"

"I am," he said offering his hand for Holly to walk with him, but Ted shook his head.

"Let's go greet Mr. Hall first, Hol," he said. "It'll only take a minute."

"Okay," Holly agreed taking her father's hand instead, and heading to the back of the office.

Mike looked at Will, who had his arms crossed as he analyzed his friend's costume.

"I would never think you'd make such a good Solo, Mike," Will assumed and Mike rolled his eyes. "And I never knew that I needed a Han Solo-slash-Power Girl crossover, that's just-"

"Shut up," Mike cut him, making him laugh.

They walked side by side to the reception to wait for Holly, which was a good idea, because it seemed like there was a bit of an awkward silence going on in there. Mike stopped frowning, his eyes on El.

"You look just like Leia," he said with a bit of shock. El shrugged.

"It was the intention," she replied, but Mike shook his head.

"No, the resemblance is uncanny. Wait, where's the hat? I saw my mom making them."

They didn't walk that much so far, but they did walk enough to know that the whole costume would be too much, so both El and Will had taken off their hats and ponchos and put them in Callie's stroller; that was where El pointed and Mike's eyebrows went up.

"Good idea," he said, taking off his overcoat. He made a messy ball with it and put it with their ponchos, and then he got one of the hats and put it on El's head. "See? Carrie Fisher's clone."

For the first time since their got there, Will saw his sister smile for real and internally he groaned. Why couldn't she get over Mike already? He was dating Power Girl over there, she didn't deserve to keep waiting for him or listen to him go on about how Lexi made her look even more incredible blah fucking blah.

Will sighed. He always got so protective over El, and so easily. He had no idea at which point they became so connected, and he knew damn well that she didn't need protection, but it was nice to have a sister his age with which he could share things, and it was good that she could share with him too. They *understood* each other without words, even. He hoped the same would happen with Callie too.

The baby made a noise in her stroller, catching everyone's attention, and when Mike turned around to look at her, it seemed like it was the first time he'd seen her.

"Calista!" he exclaimed, and then he turned to Spencer. "She has such a neat name, don't you think?"

He quickly turned back to the stroller and Will didn't even have time to stop him from taking Callie in his arms.

"Mike, no!" Will exclaimed, and El had a similar panicked expression.

Callie had been fussy ever since they left Lexi at her house and they

were afraid to stress her too much, which would make one of them go back to the Wheelers' to wait for their mom. Any brusque movement could get that kid wailing, and that was the last thing any of them wanted.

But the baby didn't cry. Instead, she just made a happy noise, moving her little arms.

Mike looked at Will with a confused expression. He was so sure of himself when it came to babies it was annoying.

"How did you do that?" El asked watching Mike cradle Callie in his arms. He shrugged.

"Practice, I guess," he answered. He was looking at the baby. "I mean, you know Holly is hard to please."

"What about Holly?" the little girl asked walking in their direction. She was licking her fingers and had chocolate in the corners of her mouth, so Will guessed that Mr. Hall had given her a special treat.

"Nothing," Mike answered her. "I was just telling Penny today that you make the best Halloween plans and you got it right again. Look at Callie, she's extra cute!"

"I know, right?" Holly said with bright eyes.

Spencer went around her desk and stood by Mike's side. She was wearing white tights along with the outfit and Holly checked her out.

"Maybe, Penny, if you stick around," Hol said to her. "I'll add you to Holly's Halloween next year too."

Spencer smiled and put a hand on her chest.

"I'd be honored!" she said, and then she put a hand on Mike's shoulder.

El turned around and walked out the door to wait for them on the sidewalk, and Will followed her. The door closed after him and he stood by her side, her with her arms crossed, him with his hands clasped behind his back. The street was filled with people, families

with children in cute colorful costumes. Plenty of princesses and pirates, as Holly predicted. Will took a deep breath – in and out - and the air was crispy and bitter.

"You okay?" he asked. El nodded.

"It's too quiet," she said somberly, sending a shiver up his spine. Coldly speaking, that afternoon wasn't quiet at all. They looked at one another. "Something is happening."

Will wanted to answer that he knew – because he did. He wanted to answer that it was getting close and time was running out. But he'd been saying that already for the past few hours, and he was done repeating himself. So he came up with something else entirely.

"What happened to not beating ourselves up today?" he asked, and El smiled. She bumped her shoulder on his and he put an arm around her shoulders, kissed her forehead tenderly. They'd try their best to not screw everything for the others this year. No one needed another '84.

They made the trajectory in almost two hours and man, Will wished he'd had a friend like Holly when he was a kid! She managed to pick all the right houses with the best candies and she was so adorable that even those homes that didn't interest her much made sure to give her something. Their best stop was at the movie theater, where the owner gave them a big bucket of sweet popcorn to share. Particularly, Will and El were a bit worried about anything that came from Dale, but they wouldn't stop Mike and Holly with their paranoia.

They left the girls at the Wheelers'. Hopper had the night shift again, so their house would be empty for the night, but that was not to where they headed after. Their group of friends agreed to meet at Dustin's again, which apparently would become tradition. The thing was, the theme for this year's Seniors Halloween Party was lame, but the whole execution was quite neat.

For the past month or so, some students got their lockers marked. Each mark meant two things: first, that marked student was banned from the party, "cursed", as they called it. No one knew why or how

they were picked, but considering that the Ps were responsible for the organization, Will and his friends were surprised El hadn't been cut from the list. His bet was that Pat Curry didn't let them, but that was just speculation. Second meaning was that the mark was part of a puzzle. In order to find out where the party would be held, they had to solve the puzzle in the best Riddler style.

The last part of the puzzle had been revealed the previous morning, when a cheerleader, Emily, was cut from the list. A cheerleader! Ava Taylor was shocked. Lexi was shocked. *No one is safe*, she had said and Will's agreement was just a little scoff. She had no idea, though he didn't mean only about the party.

Now, the boys had exhausted their ideas as to what the puzzle meant – they had a bunch of numbers and letters that were supposed to make sense, if only they had some order -, and so Lexi snatched the paper from their hands and went to her backyard with El to try and solve it without their constant chatter to interrupt her thoughts. Between cigarettes and beers, it was the first time in a long time that the boys had a chance to talk just them, with no girls around.

"I'm just saying that for someone who's constantly thinking that you're dying, someone who's been developing telekinetic powers for the past three years without telling your friends, and more importantly, someone who's probably turning into a supervillain," Dustin observed pointing his bottle of beer at Will. "You're looking too smug. What did you do, William?"

Will shrugged. Ever since they went back to school, Dustin had cut the weed supply, and they knew why: they needed their neurons. But honestly, nicotine wasn't the same, so he wasn't enjoying the smoke as he normally would.

"Ava Taylor," he answered looking at the cigarette between his fingers, and it took a while for the boys to understand what he meant.

"*WHAT*?" Dustin said at the same time Lucas exclaimed "Cheerleader Ava Taylor?" And Mike gasped "Brad Miller's girlfriend?"

Will nodded.

"Oh, yeah, him too."

"Brad Miller?" Lucas asked, sitting straighter. "Quarterback Brad? Big scary Brad?"

"Huh," Will shrugged. "He's not so scary with a dick in his mouth."

There was a long sequence of "*ews*" and "*gross*" to which Will chuckled. He wasn't lying, though.

"How did that even happen?" Dustin wondered and Will looked at him with a smirk.

"Same way it happened to you," he answered with his voice even. "I got paired for a social studies project."

It took Dustin a moment too long to pretend he wasn't in shock, and he shook his head emphatically.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dustin said a little out of breath. The other three exchanged a look, wondering how he could think he was fooling anyone. "You're outing everyone, Will, I swear we're finding out that at least a third of the guys in our school are gay."

Will frowned.

"You do know that sexuality works on a spectrum, right?" He said and Dustin looked puzzled. Will sighed. "I'll get back at it later, you're too smart to be a dumb straight."

Lucas chuckled, but then he got serious pretty fast.

"Will," he said, leaning closer on the table. "Serious stuff here, though. What the fuck you're doing with Lexi?"

"What do you mean?" He asked sipping his beer, even though he could guess where that conversation was going.

"I mean that she adores you, and she's been there for you, and you're fooling around!" Lucas said emphatically. "You better not fuck it up with my friend, dude."

Will opened his mouth to reply, but at that exact moment, the girls came back through the living room door, this time with Jennifer tagging along.

"We know what it means," Lexi announced, putting the paper on the table dramatically. "We solved it."

"The marks weren't the only clues," Jennifer explained. "The cursed were part of the puzzle too."

"Well?" asked Mike.

"Those are coordinates," El said putting a map of Hawkins on the table too.

"Hey! Where did you get that?" Dustin exclaimed.

"Jennifer found it in your room," El replied simply. Will and the others tried not to smile. She pointed to a part of the map across from where they lived, but still in the woods. "This is where the coordinates point to, and the cursed spelled the place."

"Care to elaborate?" Lucas requested. Lexi looked around the living room and found a red pencil by the TV, so she took the paper with the coordinates and started writing on its back.

"First cursed person was Willa from freshman year," she wrote down a W. "Then Odin and Ophelia. Dennis, Sonja, Winston, Amelia, Roger, Ethel, Homer, Omar, Uri, Smith and Emily." She wrote every single first letter as she said the names. "WOODSWAREHOUSE. Wood's Warehouse."

Impressive, but not surprising considering that Lexi had been the one to save their asses in their last D&D campaign. The brave princess. Will patted her shoulder to congratulate her for the good work.

"And any of you know the place? Because I've never heard of it." Mike asked and everyone shook their heads no, except for El. She avoided eye contact.

"I think I know where that is," she assumed and Will raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Nice, then let's get going!" Lucas suggested, already getting up. Will made a mental note to ask El about it later, but first he had to comment on something else.

"Supergirl, huh, Jenny?" he said, an elbow on the table and suggestion in his voice. "You know, Mike's *girlfriend* too was dressed as Kara Zor-L. Was that a girlfriend thing, or?"

Incredibly enough, confident Jennifer blushed and before she could say something in her defense, Lexi had her own comment to make.

"It's so very hard, isn't it? For white blondes to find characters that look just like them," that sent Lexi and Lucas on a long ass rant about representation that they had listened too way too many times.

After dinner, they took the bus to the other side of the town. Normally, it wouldn't be a big deal, but with most of the streets closed because of the holiday, crossing town proved to be a little bit of a crusade. It was easier and faster to walk the woods than to ride the bus. El didn't need Dustin's map and compass to find her way in those woods and Will paired with her as soon as the sound of music started to get closer.

"How do you know about this place?" he asked low so the others wouldn't hear them. El didn't look at him.

"You know how," she answered drily. He said nothing and she sighed. "You saw the concrete box we passed a few minutes back?" Will nodded. He had almost tripped on it, and he'd have fallen on his face if it wasn't for Mike grabbing his arm just in time. "That's where Hop left food for me."

Will hummed. He still didn't know what El had been doing during her time away, neither she nor Hopper told them about her sabbatical year. Sometimes, he suspected that not even Hop was sure of El's whereabouts; the only thing he knew was that she was getting fed according to the empty Tupperware he found in his next visit.

The music got considerably louder, adding to the sound of chatter as soon as they crossed the line of trees to reach a clearing. They were greeted by shouts and red cups were put in their hands. There weren't

many people there so far, it *was* quite early. Most people they found as they crossed the Chinese lamped clearing were dressed as villains, which meant that they were from 12th grade.

"Maybe their puzzle was too much?" Lucas wondered.

El pointed at the warehouse hidden in the trees. They'd been following the noise, but the entry to the low building was dark and spooky, and they didn't see it before. El stopped at the door and looked back at the clearing.

"They're disturbing it," she mumbled and Will frowned. He was getting so used to knowing exactly what El meant or wanted, but he definitely needed to ask her a few things.

"Come on, sis," he said tugging at her sleeve. "Let's loosen up a bit."

And maybe it was because he already was a little drunk, but Will found himself truly enjoying the party. The warehouse was large and low, lighted by the same type of Chinese lanterns found outside. There was a bar and a stage with a band of villains playing loud rock. The decoration didn't resemble much of a Halloween party, but it was dark enough for no one to care.

"Byers!" Will was interrupted during his dance with Lexi, and when he turned towards the voice, he saw none less than Brad Miller. He was Wolverine. "What's that story you were fucking my girl?"

Will looked at Lexi, who was frowning at the quarterback and his troupe. Brad had come with his little group of football players dressed as X-Men, even though none of those guys were *little*. It was clear that there was some sort of alpha confirmation going on and Will had little to no patience for that.

He stepped closer to Brad, then, slowly and ever so cockily. The Junior was a head taller than Will, but not intimidating.

"Do you really wanna go there?" he asked and Brad swallowed. Will had *so many things* to say about him that he was sure he was in a better bargain position.

"Stop being stupid, Brad," Ava complained and sent a death stare at

the other guys. They were trying to have Brad start a fight, but the quarterback seemed hesitant. Ava was dressed as Rogue. "Looking good, Skywalker."

Will smiled.

"Are you even surprised?" he asked and she shrugged. Looking past her, Will saw El and Patrick kissing and it was a bit of a relief. His focus went back to Ava. "I mean, it's kinda hard to go wrong with this."

He pointed at his own face and then his body, and Ava chuckled.

"You gonna let him talk to your girl like that, Brad?" one of the minions provoked, poking Brad forward and he collapsed on Will.

"Hands to yourself, Brady, I'm more than a piece of ass," Will joked, and then he looked at the other guys, focusing on the one looking for a fight. "Who the fuck are you?"

The guy shook his head confused.

"You know who I am," he said, which was true, Will knew who was under the costume, but he pointed at the clothes he was wearing.

"Yeah, but *who* are you?"

"I'm Magneto," he answered, pointing at his plastic helmet. "Duh."

Will shook his head.

"Definitely not."

The Senior launched forward, but he was stopped by his own friends' laugh.

"We told you it was a lame costume, Hulk," one of them said providing the perfect distraction for Will to sneak out of there.

He looked for Lexi, but she wasn't there anymore, so he headed outside alone, though Will Byers was barely ever alone for long.

"Will," Ava caught up with him and held his arm. "I don't know how they found out."

"Don't worry about it, A. V., Brad won't do anything to me," Will told her with certainty.

"I don't know, Hulk is good at forcing people to do what they don't want," she argued, but Will dismissed it with a hand gesture.

"Trust me, no one's laying a finger on me without my consent," he guaranteed. She smiled then.

"He went to you, didn't he?" Ava asked. "Brad. I *knew* it."

Will neither confirmed nor denied.

"It should've been confirmation enough when he cried during sex." This time, Will couldn't help but laugh and Ava joined him. "Did he cry with you?"

"No," Will shook his head. "But we didn't have sex, it was just a B.J."

"That cheating whore," she joked pretending to be offended, as if she hadn't cheated on Brad first.

Outside, the music wasn't *so* loud, allowing them to be more aware of their surroundings, so it was easy to hear someone approaching. It was Lexi. Ava looked from her to Will, and then she left them with a gentle pat on Lexi's shoulder. Cheerleader camaraderie, it seemed.

"Hey," Will greeted and Lexi smiled, but just with a shy turn on the corners of her mouth. He looked around and saw an empty log where they could sit, so he pointed at it.

"Will," she said sighing as she joined him on the log. "I, uh…"

They were silent for a moment, and he already knew what was coming to him. He knew for a while now, and he was aware that he should've worked better to not let it come to this.

Will Byers was one bad boyfriend.

"It's okay, Lexi, just say it," he encouraged, because in reality he didn't have the balls to do it himself. He could do a lot of things, but not this. Pathetic much.

She sighed again, fumbled with her ponytail.

"This weird relationship we have," she said low, avoiding eye contact. "I think we should end it."

Will waited for Lexi to look at him, and when she did, he nodded. It was true. He knew it. And he adored Lexi, but she deserved so much better. It was as if he took her for granted, she being the first person who saw him as he really was, and even if he knew how toxic he was being to her, he couldn't let go of her without her stepping away first.

Or so he was telling himself.

"It's just not fair, you know?" she continued, this time looking in his eyes. "To love you like this, is not fair."

"I know," Will answered, and just a second too late he realized that he should've answered differently. He was so bad at this. "I mean, Lexi… I don't know how to do vulnerable anymore, and I don't think you're ready to tear down my walls."

"I don't know if I want to," Lexi admitted.

It was such a shame, Will thought to himself, that life had beaten and bruised him to the point where he couldn't let people in. Because the cool kid from the record store who didn't care about anyone's opinion was one hell of a front he had to develop after coming back to life. In fact, Will wondered if he'd ever find someone to whom he could tell all the things he'd been through, someone who'd believe and accept him.

Perhaps Lexi would be that someone. Or Hercules, or Maya. He didn't know.

Anyhow, the prospect sounded unlikely.

Lexi was talking, going on about how he and El were so similar, about how she had such a hard time trying to figure them out and

how she was getting tired of their shit, but there was something unsettling about that place they were in that kept distracting him, and Will understood now what El said about disturbance.

It was angry, the place. Stressed, to be more precise. After so many years of peace, it was found again, and it didn't like it.

"Will, are you even listening to me?" Lexi complained when Will suddenly got up, interrupting her mid-sentence.

"Did you hear that?" he asked completely ignoring her. They listened, and it only took them a few seconds to hear the commotion inside the warehouse.

Without another word, Will rushed back inside to try and see what was happening. He first saw El close to the wall, keeping her distance from the eye of the storm: a fight between two Riddlers. Will frowned. It couldn't be just that that caught his attention.

"What's going on?" he asked El. The band stopped playing.

"That Riddler with the neat costume," El pointed to the one with a green suit filled with question marks and a coco hat in the same color of the suit shading most of her face. "She's not a Senior, and she's wearing the same costume as Patty P, who's freaking out. Now everyone wants to know who the impostor is."

Will hummed. They all knew that the seniors had put together a list of villains in order to not repeat costumes, so he was not surprised that a doppelganger caused such commotion, 'specially when her costume was *so much better*. The discussion heated up. It wasn't much of a *discussion*, to be fair, because the impostor wasn't saying anything, it was just Patty getting louder and more hysterical by the minute.

"When did she arrive?"

"About five minutes ago," El answered.

She fished a chocolate bar from her weapons belt and opened it. The boys joined them, each of them with something different in hands, like finger sandwiches and red cups. Lucas looked a little drunk and

Will realized that he didn't drink anything for almost two hours.

"Don't you feel a bit of anger here?" Will asked El leaning closer to her so the others wouldn't hear him. "Like the place is stressed? What is this place?"

El nodded without looking at him. She bit her chocolate and chewed before answering.

"It's the line, it was disrupted," she said. Not that it made much sense.

Will was about to ask her what she meant when a laugh cut the air, some real super villain laugh with that attractive and dangerous aspect to it, and the whole place went silent.

It was the other Riddler laughing, and she was better than any other super villain in that party even at that. Patty must've said something really funny, because the laugh went on for a while, enough to raise every hair of everyone in there.

"If you insist," she said, a hand on the top of her hat. "This party is stupid anyway."

Different from what some might think, there wasn't a collective gasp of shock when they saw the red hair under the hat and the rosy cheeks matching the color of her strands. Most people there didn't even know who Barbara Holland was, especially considering that she would've been shipped somewhere else a couple of years ago, hadn't she died by the demogorgon's hands.

That was it, another one of them. Barb looked right at Will as if sending him a reminder. His time was coming and there was nowhere to run to. *Fate*, she told him without speaking a word, *was inevitable*.

El stepped in front of Will protecting him with her body and it made Barb smirk. Not without going through her, El meant, and she already made a good job by killing their first messenger. Will doubted he had much of a chance, not without the displacer venom, but he was glad to have his sister's protection anyway.

Barb said something about wanting to enjoy one of those parties, considering that she didn't have a chance to go to her own party, but

it was okay, she would be going. Music started to play again, and people resumed their chats. But Barb didn't lose the chance to exchange a few words with Will.

"There's no way to hide, Willy, and it will hurt less if you stop fighting it," she said.

"How about you get lost, Barb?" El suggested and Barbara looked at her.

"Too bad he won't let us touch you, because you're such a pain in the ass, little Ives," she spat the words as if they made her sick, and Will could tell that El was just as confused as he was. Who was *he*? Barb looked at him again. "All at its own time, Mind Flayer."

Now there was a gasp – from Mike – and many jaw drops from Will's friends as they watched Barbara leave the building. Will didn't know her very well before, but something told him that her change went beyond being turned into a dragon.

Wait, how did he know that?

"Oh man," Dustin mumbled. "This zombie apocalypse is *no fun*."

9. a cycle of recycled emotions

Author's note: Wow, almost a full month! I'm a horrible person! D;

I'm sorry, guys, it took so long to write 20 pages, it's sad. This chapter was surprisingly hard to write for many reasons, but it has its highlights, I think. Thank you for patiently waiting for it, you guys rock! This is the last fall chapter, I hope you enjoy it.

Also, I'd like to dedicate this chapter to my friend **Mari** (loveisourresistance) as a belated birthday present. I know I didn't send you a message, but I had this in store for you *wink wink* :D Happy 27, Mari!

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8. a cycle of recycled emotions

November, 1986

Dustin Henderson

If someone asked Dustin if he had any problem with being in the backstage process of drama club he'd scoff with a dismissive hand gesture and he'd argue that '*are you kidding me? I have my own office!*', but in reality the dark room packed with cardboard and hangers in clothes racks smelling of old, overused fabric, and even though it had a great deal of privacy it could not compare to how much he enjoyed to *perform*. But *no*! The protagonist role *had* to go to stupid jock Brad in need of extra credits.

Sighing, Dustin stared at the clothes rack, hands on his hips. That damn thing covered with black plastic occupied a lot of space and he would have to sort through it to see what would be useful for their *Inferno* play scheduled for next spring. If he didn't start now, he didn't know if he would ever, so Dustin cracked his knuckles ready to get to work.

And he would have, had he not been interrupted by a knock on his open door. Dustin turned around and frowned at El.

"Hey, you busy?" she asked. Her voice wasn't that small since she left them three years ago, with that sheet of heartbreak blurring the corners of her words.

"Not at all," he lied. It was safe to assume that she was aware of the lie, El always knew everything. "Are you okay?"

El stepped inside the "office" and dropped her hockey bag on the floor before she hugged him and immediately started crying. For a moment, Dustin didn't know what to do, but once he came to his senses and barely thought about it, the door closed and she began to sob.

"El, come on," he said soothingly, rubbing her back.

He knew that she was waiting for Jennifer to go to their practice; each girl chose a different restaurant to eat and agreed to meet again in school. By now, only those students with extra activities were in school – football team in the field, drama club at the auditorium, A.V. club at the end of the hall. Something happened in the 25 minutes between the end of 7th period and now, and he had a good guess as to what triggered her.

"You two are so stupid, did you know?" Dustin asked trying to sound soft and it worked, because El let out a sad chuckle.

"I'm the stupid one, actually," El replied and stepped back to wipe her nose and eyes.

"What happened?"

"It's…" El shook her head frustrated. "This is so stupid, I don't know why I still cry about it!"

"Ellie," Dustin cut her. She still had the bad habit of being awfully vague, sometimes forgetting that he wasn't Mike, he couldn't simply *understand what she wanted to say*.

"Spencer was here," she told him. "And I tried to avoid her, I swear I did, but she saw me, and she's just *so nice*, asking about hockey and how my tutoring is going and if I think the Colts will make it to the playoffs this season – they won't. Seriously, is she even watching it? –

and *gah*! I hate her!"

"You do?" he asked frowning.

"Of course not, she's nice!" El answered in a heartbeat. "And blonde and tall and beautiful. And the complete opposite of me."

"That's not true," Dustin argued. "You might be tiny and brunette, but you are beautiful too. And Penny swallows all of Mike's nerd shit, like you, and she likes sports like you. Did you know she plays polo?"

"What the fuck is polo?" El asked and Dustin needed all his self control not to laugh.

"It's a fancy game with horses," he answered vaguely, dismissing it with a hand gesture. "Thing is, you can't keep thinking less of yourself."

"*I know…*" she mumbled and leaned against the door, her tears all but gone, though her eyes were still bloodshot. "It's just, *ugh*, so frustrating to see Mike doing so well and feel like I'm still struggling to figure this out."

She slid down and sat on the floor, legs stretched ahead of her, and Dustin did the same, sitting by her side.

"Hey, Mike's been in this world for longer than you, you kinda didn't have a normal life for over a decade, remember?" El shrugged. "You can only expect him to handle things better than you. Besides, I heard you've been doing just fine!" Dustin elbowed her. "Patrick Curry, huh?"

El smiled.

"Been saving my neck," she told him. "When I think I finally have things straight with Preston, Phyllis still holds a grudge."

Dustin shook his head.

"Humans," he said and she raised an eyebrow.

"Which you are," El reminded him, but he shook his head somberly.

"Except that I'm not, remember?" he said stretching his arms in front of him, missing bones allowing him to look somewhat alien, and it made El laugh. Dustin put an arm around her shoulders. "I know it's been a few months already, but give it time, Ellie. Things will work out, we have other things to worry about, and when you least expect it this teenage drama will finally be over."

El sighed.

"I hope you're right, D. I really do."

He hoped so too. Truth was, he was mostly repeating things his mother said to him. Dustin really didn't know why his friends sought him out for advice, they were all the same age. It was hard being the first of everything, he guessed, it gave him some wisdom status when in reality they were all in the same boat.

Well, he might as well fulfill that destiny.

El's head snapped up and she sat straighter. Ever since she cut her hair, rebel strands kept escaping from her ponytail and falling in her eyes. She pushed them back with a hand and fished some hair clips from her pocket with the other.

"Jennifer is here," she said, at the same time getting up, fixing her hair, listening to the world and getting her things from the floor. And the girl thought she wasn't remarkable! If Dustin was to do that many things at the same time, he'd probably forget the basics, like how to breathe. She smirked. "I'm gonna give you guys some privacy."

"What?" he said too baffled to give her a proper answer.

El opened the door and Dustin got up still lacking words, and before he knew it, Jennifer was coming down the hall with her own giant hockey bag.

"Hey Jenny, do we still have a few minutes?" El asked as if nothing had happened. Dustin frowned. From all he gathered, she didn't need extra minutes for anything. "I gotta fix this hair, it's annoying me."

"Yeah, of course," Jen answered frowning at El.

"Great! I will wait in the parking lot," she said and it hit him. El wasn't getting herself some minutes. She was allowing *them* a little time.

Sneaky little Jean Grey.

As soon as El was out of earshot, Jennifer pointed at her.

"Was she crying?" she asked and he shrugged.

Jennifer stepped inside and closed the door, dropping her bag on the floor much like El did, and then she pouted. Here he'd go again.

"I think I did a fuck up," she confessed and Dustin smiled.

"Wanna talk about it?" he offered and she nodded. His destiny liked to catch up with him fast.

[...]

Mike Wheeler

It was only the second time Mike had come to the golf course, but it seemed that Penny already knew it was better to let him just carry the bag. At least that was how he felt as he fixed the strap on his shoulder.

Coming to the country club had been his father idea, an opportunity to pass some ideas to his boss outside the office environment, but Mike couldn't get a ball in the hole to save his life and accepting to tag along sounded more and more like a mistake as he embarrassed himself in front of his girlfriend and his boss.

"You know, I have a better way of teaching you how to play," Spencer said stopping by his side. She touched his elbow to make him look at her. "I can see your father is not helping."

He really wasn't, it was true. With only 40 days to Mike's 16th birthday, for some unknown reason Ted Wheeler still thought that his only son would be good at picking up sports fast, even if there wasn't a day in Mike's life that he could remember even remotely *liking* sports.

"Maybe we can go on our own course, away from their boring grown up conversation," she suggested with a smirk. "Make the best of our time."

Mike smiled at her suggestion and leaned closer to her.

"You know, that's a great idea," he said and then kissed her quickly. "I doubt my dad would mind. Where is he?"

He looked around. It wasn't the first time that they hopped out of the golf cart and his dad and Mr. Hall disappeared in the middle of white men in khaki pants. Spencer spotted him first.

"Is that… Ellie talking to him?" she asked pointing to Mike's left and he frowned.

Ted and Mr. Hall were talking to a girl who looked a lot like El. She was wearing jeans and a band shirt, a blue plaid on her waist, her hair in a messy ponytail and Jesus fucking Christ, it really was El!

Mike felt a little lightheaded. They had come all the way to Carmel for a little quiet and nice and how could he have quiet and nice with El *and* Penny around? Not that El was a font of distress, but being around her lately made Mike completely antsy. It was a little ridiculous of him, considering that they had broken up almost six months ago and he *did* move on with his life, but there still was something about El that shook his foundations.

He took a deep breath, contemplating the advantages of freaking out right there and then and when he came to his senses, Spencer already was walking in their direction. Spencer, who had to figure out on her own that once upon a time Mike and El were a couple, because he had been too coward to tell her the truth. Spencer, who'd been understanding and nice and tried to make friends with El not knowing that El was the hardest person to befriend in the universe.

Out of options, Mike put the bag back in the golf cart and rushed after Penny, certain that there would be some damage control to make. Ted Wheeler, he absolutely *loved* El. To forgive her for all the drama with the government three years ago was the easiest thing Mike had seen his father do. Overall, Mike supposed that El amazed

Ted by being genuinely interested in what he had to say, and Mike was too nice to tell him that all her interest was because she knew nothing about the world.

Mike shook his head. No, that wasn't it. He knew better than to think that El was that naïve, than to assume that by now she wouldn't have a clue of who she was and where she stood. That was what had put them in this position in the first place: him being self-absorbed and a bad listener.

It was about time he learned from his mistakes.

"Tell me you're nailing it, Ellie, I bet you are," Ted was saying to El, who smiled and held tighter to her club. "With all that hockey training you're doing, you have got to know how to hit a ball."

"I'm doing all right, I guess," she replied shrugging.

"Are you kidding me?" Pat Curry interrupted. Mike hadn't even seen him there before. "She's a natural, sir."

"There's a lot of patience involved," El said with a small frown. "And I'm not very patient."

"But you're hitting it right almost every single time," Pat argued and El looked at Mike with a little smirk.

"Beginner's luck, I guess," she said and Mike smiled too. He knew what it meant – she was using her powers to get done with the sport, and for a change he totally supported her.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here, Ellie," Ted said, hardly catching on the little secret exchange that was happening there. "You know, I miss having you around the house. You should come over more often."

"Yeah, maybe when Nancy comes back for winter break," she said avoiding eye contact. "And I came here because Pat invited me. He works here."

"But today is my day off and I thought, why not enjoy the last weekend before our first snowfall?" He explained. He looked over at

El and she looked at him and nodded. "We should get going, right? Still have half of the course to cover."

"Oh, yeah, go ahead," Ted said, waving them off. "Have fun, kids!"

"Bye, Mr. Wheeler. Mr. Hall, Mike, Spencer," El waved her goodbye and joined Pat in a golf cart parked nearby. Ted sighed.

"Lovely girl, that Hopper kid, good listener," he said and turned to Mike. "But you had to ruin everything, didn't you?" he scowled putting a heavy hand on Mike's shoulder.

Mike stuttered.

"I-I didn't ruin *anything*," he tried to argue and his father scoffed.

"Of course you did, everyone knows that!" Mike felt his face getting red and anger building up in his gut.

Seriously, whose side was this man on? He had a long set of insults ready to come out of his mouth, but Penny was there and so was Mr. Hall, and it wouldn't be a good idea to cuss at his father in front of his boss. So Mike just sighed, trying to calm down.

"Look, Penny and I were wondering if it's okay to go find another course to play, you guys are slowing us down," he said instead, and Mr. Hall laughed.

"*We're* slowing you down?" he said humorously. "Remind me again who struck a ball right in the middle of a sand bank?"

Spencer chuckled, but she cut the laugh when Mike glanced at her, his face still hot.

"If anything, *you're* slowing *us* down!" the boss continued. "But go ahead, find an easier course to follow and meet us at the restaurant in an hour for lunch."

"Yes, sir!" Mike said feeling excitement for the first time that day, probably because the idea of eating in just an hour was something to look forward to.

"Behave!" Mr. Hall shouted as they stepped away. "And find yourselves another cart!"

"Dad! Come on!" Penny protested. She already had one foot in the driver's side. Her father shooed her away and they didn't have another option but to get the clubs bag and look for another cart.

They walked in silence to the carts parking lot, much to Spencer's discomfort. Even if she was not that talkative of a person, she also wasn't a big fan of silences, especially the awkward ones.

"So," she started. "Someone should've instructed Elle on what to wear, I doubt she's comfortable."

"Oh, I bet Pat instructed her," Mike replied. "She just does what she wants."

He didn't want to sound bitter, but that was how it came out. In fact, he didn't feel the right to still be bitter about El's choices, she had made it clear that her decisions were hers and hers alone to make. And fine, he had to admit that he had been a little overprotective at the time, but still, that was how he let out the words: bitterly. Like someone who doesn't know where their priorities lie.

"I'm taking your break up wasn't on the best terms," Penny said awkwardly and Mike raised an eyebrow skeptically.

Involuntarily, he touched the bridge of his nose where it had been broken. His mind flew back to that afternoon when Callie Hopper was born and they were all in the waiting room; Will had strutted in his direction fiercely.

"Wheeler? A word, please?" he had said through clenched teeth, and Mike followed his friend outside. As soon as they stepped on the sidewalk, Will turned around and his fist made contact with Mike's nose. "You stupid fuck!"

"I guess you could put it that way," Mike answered Spencer, not letting out any details. He didn't want Penny to think that he was a horrible person, which was how he felt whenever he thought over the whole break up thing.

"Was there anyone to blame?" She asked. "I mean, if you think about it, sometimes there wasn't, sometimes people just fall apart."

They found a vacant cart and Spencer stepped behind the wheel, Mike by her side. There clearly was someone to blame – himself – but he wouldn't say it out loud, because it would only confirm every single thing his friends had been saying the past months.

"I guess people do," he replied instead, still not giving her much information. Mike took a deep breath and turned to Spencer then, willing to change the subject. "You know this country club better than me, what should we do now?" He asked and she smiled mischievously.

"Well, we only have forty-five minutes until lunch, so I have an idea," she said, one eyebrow raised. Penny was known for her *brilliant* ideas, some of them also quite naughty. As a person who grew up never aiming to misbehave, being with her had led Mike to some pretty crazy adventures.

Not even Will could top that.

That following weekend, the Indianapolis Colts played at the Hoosier Dome. It also happened to be the day of the tickets their school had won for the class tournament and again there hadn't been an option to pass on the event, because it was Jennifer Hayes' 16th birthday and she demanded that *everyone would go!* Not 'should', 'would'. Which was pretty bossy, but what could they do?

So they all got packed with warm clothes, which meant that they had to go in more cars, because the thick jackets occupied so much space. Mike and Lucas went with Lucas' father, Grant Henderson took Dustin, Lexi and Jennifer, and Hopper drove Will and El to the stadium.

"Crazy how we're almost below zero and people still show up to this shit," Dustin commented when they all found their seats, the stadium starting to fill.

The school once again had gotten some shitty seats and they weren't the only students in the audience. Apparently, the teams did that

good-deed-free-tickets thingy to guarantee a full house, because the Indiana teams were so pathetic there was always vacancy.

"One day," Lucas had said last year, when they left after that inexplicable win the Pacers managed to get. "We're gonna see them win the title again. And we won't be too young to forget it!"

It was safe to say that he wasn't as optimistic about the Colts.

"Anyone think they'll stand a chance of winning?" wondered Lexi, trying to be positive. Mike and Will exchanged a look. They could *not* have an opinion, because they absolutely despised football.

"Lexi, darling," Lucas said leaning forward. His seat was right behind El, and Lexi was sitting to her right. "They played 12 games. They lost 12 games. Do the math."

"They might have a chance," she insisted and El, Jennifer, Lucas and Dustin shook their heads.

"Nah," they said almost at the same time.

The game was so bad, but so bad that they had more fun with the thematic camera than the actual game. They passed around thermal bottles of hot chocolate and coffee brought from home, gloved hands holding warm cups for another source of heat, and spent a lot of time chatting.

"Losing a million to none, talk about a depressing team," Lucas commented when the game was interrupted again for another time out. "*Worst sweet sixteen ever!*" he shouted and Jennifer lowered her head, forehead almost touching her knees. Will turned around to pat her head sympathetically.

"I think you do know how to do it," Mike said turning to El and getting back to what they were talking about before. "It's probably just blocked."

"It's not *blocked*, it's not there," she said, sounding frustrated. He had been tutoring her for English and writing, and El managed to up her grades to a C-, but after that the struggle became unbearable. "Do you think that your *love* for sports is just blocked? You despise it, Mike,

that's not gonna change!"

Touché. He had to think quickly on a smart response.

"But that doesn't mean I can't understand it," Mike told her. "I learned about hockey to watch you play, I know enough about soccer to fight for Holly when I take her to her practices. Do I enjoy it? Not a fucking ounce. But it's a useful survivor skill."

El was glaring at him skeptically, one eyebrow raised and a judgemental pout. Incredible how good she was at making him feel pathetic without saying much.

"Uh, guys?" Lexi elbowed El, who looked at her. "The camera."

They both looked up at the stadium screen in front of them and saw that the camera was directed at them. Mike swallowed. Love cam. He and El. Why couldn't it be the bongo cam, or the Thanksgiving cam with the stupid dancing turkeys? *Why in the hell it had to be the love cam?* By his side, El stared at the screen wide-eyed, mouth ajar. Now would be a good moment to panic, Mike supposed.

"It's my chance!" he heard Will say, barely processed it, and the next thing he knew was that he was forced to turn to his left and someone – he realized with the shock that kept his eyes open that it was Will! – kissed him.

It was quick and conservative for Will's standards, but it was enough to make Mike blush through and through. Their friends around them were laughing (hell, Dustin even fell off his seat!) and Will made a face.

"Nah, still don't get it," he said. Mike didn't know what Will didn't get and he was too embarrassed to ask, but judging by the fist bump he shared with El behind Mike's back, he guessed the kiss had more to do with him helping his sister out than trying to 'get' anything.

"Yo, not gonna lie," Dustin said still laughing. He leaned against Mike's seat. "I've been kinda waiting for this since 5th grade."

Will turned on his seat gracefully, one arm propped on the back of his seat and a knowing smirk on his face. Jerk.

"It was bound to happen wasn't it?" he wondered, making Dustin laugh more.

"And the number of straight dudes in Hawkins again falls by one," Lucas joked. If possible, Mike blushed even more.

"Shut up," he mumbled, which only caused more teasing. He suddenly remembered something. "Don't *ever* tell my dad about it!"

"Dude," Jennifer interrupted. "Our whole class saw it. Big screens, remember?" she pointed at the stadium screen in front of them as if he needed a reminder and Mike groaned.

"It was nice meeting you, guys," he said turning to the field and shrinking on his uncomfortable and freezing seat. "I'm a dead man."

Lucas chuckled.

"We'll remember you fondly, buddy," he said and Will rolled his eyes.

"You're such a drama queen," he provoked, elbowing Mike. On a normal day, Mike would reply with something snarky, like how Will didn't give a shit because his father had already deserted him and he had nothing to lose, but death was too close for him to be mean.

El held his hand and he looked at her.

"Relax, Mike, he won't do anything," she guaranteed. "Come on, enjoy the game a little. Maybe you'll find out a profound passion for football."

Mike scoffed. *Profound*. Her vocabulary was impressive for someone who barely talked a few years ago, not being able to tell stories was such a waste. El giggled and let go of his hand.

"I deserve that," he said.

The Colts lost their 13th consecutive game of the season, managing to score only 3 points. Mike didn't know much about football, but he guessed that was quite pathetic.

"Not even one touchdown! Well, that was a total waste of time,"

Lucas commented as they exited the stadium. It was so cold that the group of friends was walking impossibly close together.

"It's so sad that last year we got to see an awesome game and this year we were stuck with *this*," Lexi complained pointing at the team's store. Jennifer sighed dramatically.

"I guess I'm out of luck," she said lowering her head.

"Hey, you can't win in both love and game, Jenny, it's how life is," Will argued and Jennifer's head snapped up to stare at him.

"What do you mean?" she asked blushing a little. Or maybe it was just the cold.

They stopped in the parking lot trying to remember where their drivers said they'd parked. El spotted Hopper's jeep and pointed the way. Will didn't answer Jennifer; they all knew that she knew what he meant, truth be told.

"I'm skipping class tomorrow," Lucas announced casually.

It wasn't that they had to make plans based on who would or wouldn't be in school every day, but letting each other know that they'd be skipping was something the four friends had been doing since always.

"You going to go buy your car already?" Lexi asked and Lucas shook his head no.

"I'm going to Bloomington to meet Max," he said shooting a knowing look at Mike and then Will.

"Mad Max?" Lexi asked. "As in a date? I didn't know you guys were still a thing!"

"She's my friend," Lucas replied uncomfortably. Mike knew that this romance stuff always bothered Lucas; that was why it took so long for him to actually do something about Max.

"I remember her," Jennifer said. "Wasn't she totally into you?"

"Not just me," Lucas mumbled, quickly glancing at Dustin, and then he sighed. "Anyway, I'm going there to talk to her. She found the thing."

"She did?" Mike and El said at the same time.

"Yeah, and I'm gonna go get it," Lucas said firmly.

"What *thing*?" asked Lexi crossing her arms.

"A thing we need for stuff," Dustin replied vaguely and Lexi looked slightly pissed.

"Seriously?" she exclaimed. "You guys are always keeping secrets from us! You go on field trips and secret meetings and random visits to other cities, and you never include us!" she ranted. Perhaps the sports environment was leaving some a little on edge, Mike supposed. "Remember the beginning of summer, when you promised you wouldn't leave me out of your adventures? That's exactly what you've been doing!"

"To be fair, we *were* very high that night," Will argued, as if it was a good reason to keep her out of their shit.

"On *my* weed!" Lexi practically shouted and they all turned to her wide-eyed.

"Seriously, Lexi?" Mike hushed and she closed her mouth, cheeks burning hot. "Hopper is right there!"

"I want in, whatever it is you're doing," she said much lower this time.

"Believe me, you don't," Lucas told her. "And where the hell did this existential crisis came from?"

"Lucas, come on," Mike interrupted, feeling bad for her. Lexi just wanted to be included, he knew how it felt.

"No," he said firmly and then turned to Lexi again. "You have to stop thinking you're not enough the way you are and accept that some things your friends do are not for you."

Mike just glanced at the girl and knew that she wasn't just *slightly* pissed anymore. Lexi was *livid*. She stepped closer to Lucas, hands in fists on her sides.

"You are so full of shit," she said through her teeth and passed by him to go to the car.

"Well, that escalated quickly," Jennifer said, hands on her hips. She didn't seem bothered to be kept out of their shenanigans at all. "What's that story of getting high together?"

Mike sighed.

"I wish I could get high right now."

"Yeah," they all said at the same time, except El who shook her head.

"I couldn't," she said. "I have a feeling I would be unbearable."

Will scoffed and Mike couldn't deny that that seemed accurate. El had way too many demons to have an easy drugs experience.

"Kids, come on!" Chief Hopper called from where he stood with Lucas's dad. "You like to freeze your asses?"

"Let's do it tonight," Will suggested in a hurry.

"Freeze our asses?" El asked confused and he shook his head.

"Get high together," he explained. "We all need it."

"Did you hear what I just said?" El wondered crossing her arms.

"I do like the idea," Mike interrupted. "Your hockey season is over, you won't have to pee in cups for the next three months. It's the last week before we're consumed by school work. And it's so fucking cold we could use a mental break."

"There's a logic flaw in your arguments, but I like them," Jennifer said. El rolled her eyes.

"Where are you planning to get any weed?" Dustin asked, and they all

looked at him. He narrowed his eyes. "No fucking way!"

"The way I see it," Lucas said. "You can ask Grant, or we can do it."

"We're not dealers!" Dustin exclaimed. When he talked about drugs was the only time he managed to actually speak quietly.

"Nobody *said* that," Mike replied.

Dustin opened his mouth many times, but didn't manage to say anything until Jennifer bumped her hip on his playfully.

"Come on, D, just tonight," she said. Mike didn't know Jenny Hayes was capable of sounding so sweet. Dustin sighed.

"Stay on your coms, I will see what I can do," he finally caved and they all cheered. They were quickly interrupted by a bunch of honks, though. "Guess we gotta get going, if we want to make the best of our night."

El called shotgun and hurried to the passenger seat, but Will grabbed Mike's arm before he got in the car.

"What is it? Wanna goodbye kiss?"

Will frowned.

"Did you just… crack a joke?" he asked, a hand on his chest. "Wow, that's quite disturbing."

"William," Mike said rolling his eyes.

"Michel," Will mimicked. "Just… find out what Lucas gathered with Max, okay? I don't think he'll say much with the girls there."

"Yeah, sure," he guaranteed. He wanted more info about the venom anyway, and Lucas would be the best person to brainstorm about ways to use it.

They each got in their cars and rode back to Hawkins looking forward to the evening. Hell, Mike really needed to relax.

[...]

Lucas Sinclair

At least 120 minutes separated Hawkins from Bloomington, because Lucas had to go to Indianapolis first to take the bus the rest of the way. Since Max left two years ago, they only kept contact through phone calls and letters, and to have an excuse to go see her was at least exciting.

He needed three tries to get a cab downtown willing to drop him off at her neighborhood, and even so he had to jump off on the first street and get instructions with passers-by to find her house. Compared to many places, that wasn't a friendly community at all, and standing in front of Max's house, Lucas felt bad. She didn't deserve that.

"Hey, mate!" a random dangerous-looking guy called. He wasn't nearly as tall as Lucas, but he knew how to be intimidating. "You lost or something?"

Lucas shook his head.

"Just waiting for a friend," he said and looked at his watch. "She should be here any minute."

Max had told him to wait for her in front of her house at 9:40, because she would sneak out of school. At that time, Billy would be working and they could sneak into his study. It was 9:38.

"You waiting for Max?" the guy asked, sounding both offended and insecure. "The fuck are you?"

"You bet he's waiting for Max," a girl shouted behind Lucas and when he turned around he saw her come down the block on her skate, her hair flying behind her, a paper bag in her hand.

She jumped off her skateboard right into Lucas's arms hugging him tight, and something settled inside him as he hugged her.

"Hey," he greeted and she let go a bit to look up at him with a bright smile.

"You look like you could have some breakfast," she said. Right on cue, his stomach growled. Max stepped back and got her skate before she turned to Scary Dude. "Get lost, Blink."

"Hey, I could use some breakfast too!" Blink said when they started up the front porch of the beaten little house.

"Fuck off!" Max exclaimed. Lucas had a feeling that she only didn't give him the finger because her hands were busy, and so he offered to take the bag of groceries. She got her keys. "Thanks. Please, don't mind the mess."

She opened the door and Lucas followed her inside the packed living room. It looked a lot like the house they lived at in Hawkins. The TV was on without anyone watching, so Max turned it off and turned the radio on, leaving her skate in a corner.

"I hate it when Billy does that," she said beelining between boxes, chairs and beer bottles to get to the kitchen. "No one is fucking watching anything, turn this shit off, you know?"

On the radio, Michael Jackson had a lot to say about Billy Jean. Lucas put the bag on the small table as Max turned on the toaster and put two slices of bread to toast. She got orange juice and bacon from the bag, eggs and butter from the fridge, and a frying pan from under the sink that she put on the stove to heat up.

"I hope I'm not having you waste any important cash," Lucas said peeking inside the bag and Max clicked her tongue.

"I'm working four times a week at this diner and we needed groceries anyway, so…" She put some butter in the hot pan and just a string of oil, and then she put the bacon to fry. After that, she got a jar of cookies from the top of the fridge and offered to Lucas, who gladly accepted it. "How was the game yesterday?"

"Shitty," Lucas answered with his mouth full. "Colts didn't even score *one* touchdown."

"So I heard," she said mixing the eggs. "That why you got stoned?"

Lucas stopped cold.

"How can you tell?" he asked and saw her look from his face, right in his eyes and then to his hand full of cookies.

"Did you take a look around? I know what stoned people look like," Max finally answered, and he could swear she sounded a little disappointed, even if her posture didn't show it. "How is everyone?"

"Hammered at school," he answered and they chuckled. Max turned the bacon on the pan.

"Who would ever think," Max wondered. "That such bunch of nerds would turn out like that."

"Hey, we're still nerds!" Lucas protested. "The only cool people in our group are the girls."

"Oh, yeah, that's new too," she said soberly. "*Girls*," Max added with a little shudder. Lucas shook his head.

"Don't be like that," he said watching her put the bacon on a platter. Max added a little more butter to the pan, salt and black pepper, and then she poured the eggs, stirring it with a fork.

"Get me the milk?" She requested, and Lucas opened the fridge. He got a spoon and added some milk to the eggs. Then he got the toasts out of the toaster and put more slices in it. "Oh, you know what you're doing."

"Military dad," he explained. "Taught me how to be my own man since I can remember."

"Badass Lucas," Max elbowed him playfully. Lucas smiled. He'd always been good with praises. "So, what did you guys do last night? Looks like y'all had a lot of fun."

"You know, it's really all a blur," Lucas confessed as he put the milk back in the fridge. "I'm not sure what's got into Mike, but he was like 'LET'S GET HIGH!', and we just went with it. I think it was his way to compensate us dragging him to a game."

Max put the eggs in two different plates, turned on the coffee machine and put the two toasts in one of the plates. She was a coffee

person, and the juice meant that she remembered. Lucas couldn't help but smile at the thought. At that moment, he had a flash of memory from the night before.

"Oh," he said with surprise and Max looked at him. "You remember Jennifer Hayes?"

She thought for a moment.

"Hockey Blonde?"

"Yes. She's dating Dustin."

Max stepped back.

"Shut up! Didn't she have the biggest crush on Will?"

"Yeah, but then Lexi Solaris *stole* him from her, sort of," he explained. Max's jaw dropped even more. "And at some point she became friends with Dustin and one thing led to the other. BUT," and he said it with a lot of emphasis. "They were keeping it a secret. More or less. I mean, we all knew they were fucking three times a week, but they never assumed. Part of me thinks that they really believe that they were doing a good job at hiding it."

Lucas chuckled thinking about the past year, the way Jennifer would look at Dustin after he'd expose some of his crazy theories or simply say something nerdy. *All the blondes like Dustin*, Will had joked once, and it seemed true.

"So, last night," he continued. "We were at D's and they disappeared to his room, and not long after started this moaning and boy, they are loud!"

"Oh, my God," Max said laughing, her cheeks red.

"Long story short, I don't think they'll pretend they're not together anymore, at least not in front of us."

The toasts were ready and Max put them in the other plate with scrambled eggs, and then she divided the bacon for them equally and sat the plates on the table. Lucas sat in front of one of the plates and

saw her put peanut butter, butter, honey and syrup in the middle of the table. Max set a cup of orange juice for Lucas and a mug of black coffee for her before sitting by his side and offering him a fork.

"Let's see if that diner job is doing you any good," Lucas joked and Max rolled her eyes. He took the first bite and hummed. "Yummy."

"Thanks," she said.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Lucas was crazy hungry, it was his second breakfast already. He had eaten at Dustin's before he left to Indianapolis, and had had snacks on the way here. He frowned at his almost empty plate.

"What is it?" Max asked.

"I'm almost sure that Lexi jumped Will in the middle of the Henderson's living room," Lucas said thoughtfully. "He was high, she was drunk. And there was the moaning… and then El showed up and she was all 'YOU TWO BROKE UP!', and then she dragged Lexi outside and they didn't come back. I think she slept at Lexi's."

"Oh, the famous El," Max said. "I wonder if I'll ever meet her."

"I'm sure you will," Lucas said with certainty. "She's staying now. I think you'd get along. All you have to do is show up."

Max lowered her head, partially hiding her smile. Delicate subject, Lucas knew, and he had come all the way to Bloomington not to try and convince her to leave with him, though that was what he felt more inclined to do as time passed.

"So, how much time do we have?" Lucas asked, passing a neat layer of butter on his lukewarm toast.

"The whole day," Max said. "Billy is working in Edinburg."

"That far?"

"It's an hour," she pointed out. "And it's something steady."

"What does he do? Contraband?"

Max narrowed her eyes at him.

"Fuck you," she said stabbing her eggs. "He's working at Edinburg's Correctional Facility."

Lucas choked on his toast and started to cough. He had to drink some juice to be able to talk again.

"Billy? Is working *for* the correctional system instead of *being* in the correctional system?" he exclaimed, finding it hard to believe. "What, and I mean it from the bottom of my heart, the actual fuck?"

"He's been trying for the police, but he can never pass the psychological test," Max explained, which somehow made things worse.

"The police! That's-" Lucas shook his head baffled. "What the fuck."

"Come on, don't be like that," Max pleaded putting a hand on his forearm and Lucas looked right into her eyes for long enough to understand that he shouldn't have a say on it. He had to swallow his next remark.

"Max," he started and she shook her head.

"He's looking out for me, okay?" she argued. "It's the only thing he's good at."

"You're still afraid of him," Lucas said. It wasn't a question, but a reminder. He needed her to always remember that.

"I can protect myself," Max assured firmly, holding his stare. After a few seconds, her eyes softened. "I promise I'm fine."

"And you'll tell me-"

"I'll tell you," she guaranteed. "I promise."

Well, that should work for something, at least for a while. Lucas took a deep breath and looked down at her hand that still was resting on his arm. She had so many freckles, a constellation on skin. So beautiful.

He covered her hand with his. During the brief time Max lived in Hawkins, she and him were practically the same height and their hands were almost the same size, but now her hand seemed so small in his.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Max said with a sharp breath. She got up and opened the fridge, taking out a bunch of things to find something hidden at the back.

Lucas watched her fumble and topple mustard bottles until she found what she was looking for, and when she turned around, she had a small cake in her hands with chocolate frosting and a blue candle on top.

"Happy belated birthday," she said, her cheeks red and Lucas got up.

"Max!" he exclaimed taking the cake from her hands so she could close the fridge. "You didn't have to."

"I know, and I didn't do anything. The baker of the diner owed me a favor, so…" she said putting the plates in the sink after closing the fridge. She opened the first drawer and fished a lighter from it. "Chocolate dough, red fruit filling and more chocolate for Chocolate Daddy."

That sounded so sexy out of her mouth, and it was completely new. Whenever Max called him Chocolate Daddy before, it was out of irony, but now it had a whole different meaning. It felt different. She lit the candle for him.

"Sweet sixteen, huh?" Max said with a big smile. Lucas nodded smiling too. "Make a wish."

He closed his eyes visualizing his wish. He had only two, but one seemed completely out of reach at the moment, while the other was right here in front of him. Lucas opened his eyes to see Max watching him with expectation. *Be safe*, he thought and blew out the candle.

They ate half of the cake and talked about lighter things, like how Max had been working hard on this science project that had the potential to be her early ticket to Berkeley and how Lucas had finally

caved and joined the basketball team, even though he spent most of the time benched. Only after their stomachs were full, Max led him upstairs and into a dark room.

"This is Billy's '*study*'," she said using air quotes. "You see that door?" she pointed to the wall on her left. "That's the door to his bedroom. This place is his church, you know? He's got all his 'discoveries'," again with the quotes. "Stuffed here. His notebooks, piles and piles of random articles and…"

As she mentioned Billy's things, Max also pointed around the room: the shelf with a glass door on their right, a writing desk on the corner, and a hotel fridge under the window.

"This is where he keeps the venom," Max said resting a hand on top of the fridge. "He has everything labeled by date, with details about the extraction and more information on his notebooks, because the vials have these identification numbers. I don't know, I never got my hand on his notes."

Her fingers traced the top of the door of the fridge and Lucas could see that Max was nervous. Hell, with a brother like hers, he'd be nervous too. It already had been of great courage of her to go look for the venom in the first place.

"I didn't take it first to not risk him noticing that the vial was missing. He'd suspect me first of all, do a search on my room and take it back, maybe even put a higher security on it."

"It's okay, Max," Lucas said, and then he frowned. "Wait, but what happens to you after I leave with the vial and he finds out it's missing?"

Max smirked.

"He'll search all over my things, but won't find anything," she said. "His fine little weapon will be long gone."

"Weapon?" Lucas echoed. Max shrugged.

"It's the only explanation I have for all this research he does," she explained. "Billy's never gone to college, even though he has the mind

to it. He must have something bigger in mind."

Max bit her lower lip, turned her back to him and kneeled down, opening the fridge. The small refrigerator was packed with vials, resembling the rest of the messy house, but she didn't lie when she said that all the little bottles were numbered and labeled. Max only needed a minute to find the one she was looking for, and she double checked the label before handing it to Lucas. He read the label too.

Demon/Displacer; Hawkins, Indiana. Venom from the tail. November 5, 1984.

A shiver went up his spine as Lucas remembered that year, remembered the Demon, as Max used to call it. The vial was ¾ full, approximately 200ml of venom. He swallowed remembering the way the beast launched at them, how it projected itself in front of them and the way its tail shot the venom in their direction. If his mind wasn't failing him, which was unlikely to say the least, one of those shots seemed to have way more than 200ml of venom.

"It doesn't look like much," Lucas said analyzing the cold vial. Max closed the fridge and stood up. She looked tense.

"I think he makes experiments," she said, her voice low. "On himself, I mean. And maybe small animals, I can't tell. I hear noises, but I never find any animal afterwards."

Max was avoiding eye contact with Lucas as if ashamed, but he had to let her know that she shouldn't be ashamed with him. She wasn't doing anything wrong. All Max ever did was survive.

Lucas closed his hand with the vial and then put it in the pocket of his jacket, the one with the zipper. After that, he stepped closer and hugged Max, letting her relax in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his waist, rested her cheek against his chest and let him run his fingers on her hair. She felt so thin and fragile, even though she was the strongest person Lucas had ever known.

"Thank you," he said. There might not be a lot of venom in that vial, but he still hoped it was enough to buy them some time – buy *Will* some time – until they could figure out how to get the thessal out of

him.

They had lunch at the diner Max worked in, this time Lucas paying. She made sure to pack the rest of the cake for him to take home, even though he insisted she kept at least a slice for later. They shared a slice of peach pie with cream for dessert and sighed at the weather. Max had a few degrees on Lucas, but it still was cold, even if it was sunny.

She walked with him to the bus station and somewhere along the way they held hands. Max was the only person who could do that and not make Lucas feel awkward. She was special to him. He paid for the ticket to Indianapolis, and they didn't know if it was out of luck or not, but the next bus would leave in twenty minutes, so they directed to the bus stop.

The wind insisted on blowing Max's hair on her face, even if she was wearing a beanie, and she had to gather it over her left shoulder to minimize the whipping. She reached out and traced the pattern of colors on Lucas's dark jacket distractedly and then looked up at him.

"There's something I need to do," she said. He knew. He thought it was something he had to do too.

Max held on to the front of Lucas's jacket and got on the tip of her toes and he leaned forward, meeting her halfway, letting her kiss him. So far, Lucas's experiences with kisses hadn't been the best, to say the least. He had kissed Lexi and it had been a total disaster, because they couldn't stop laughing at the absurdity of it and it felt completely wrong. And before that, when Max tried to kiss him back in the day, he totally freaked out.

Truth was he couldn't care less for kissing. It was just this thing you do with your mouth and it was kind of boring. He could never understand why Mike and El were constantly attached by the tongue, and after their broke up he had to put up with Will and all his acquaintances. But now, Lucas let Max kiss him. He didn't freak out, he just let her. He dove with her.

Boy, it felt *good*.

She put her arms around his neck and he put his arms around her waist, and he even closed his eyes this time, not bored at all. He could do it, Lucas decided. With Max, he could do this romance and relationship thing. It was a theory at first, something he'd think about sometimes instead of sleeping, but now he was sure it was possible. She let go just a couple of inches and looked into his eyes.

"I know you're not a big fan o-"

"Shhhh," he interrupted her and kissed her again. Lucas felt Max smile as he kissed her. He liked the way her hand held the back of his neck, how her other hand traced the line of his jaw.

"Indianapolis, 2:40p.m. Five minutes," someone announced forcing them to step back out of breath.

Max touched her bottom lip. Her cheeks and nose were an adorable shade of pink that matched well with her hair. Lucas stepped closer, rested his forehead on hers, looking into her eyes.

"I wish you would come with me," he said and she smiled weakly, touched his cheeks with light fingers.

"I will go with you, eventually," Max told him softly. "I just have to finish it here. All I need is two years, and then we go. Then we'll be together where it's nice and warm and safe."

"Berkeley," Lucas said with a sigh.

"Berkeley," Max confirmed. Her thumb touched his bottom lip. "Two more years. Can you wait for me?"

Part of Lucas wanted to scoff. He, who had given so much shit to Mike for pining for a girl they didn't even know was alive, now looking at one of his best friends and swearing, *promising* that he would wait. Hell, he would wait counting the days! For her. His Mad Max.

10. the madness in our wake

Author's note: Wow, it's been so long, I bet everyone forgot about me D;

I'm so very sorry, guys! I really am, but I underestimated this semester. Did college ever suck the life out of you? Because it did to me, damn. "But By! I saw you posting other things!" Guys, other things weren't as important or complex as this chapter, I swear. Nor as long. (well, except for that Gorillaz oneshot, but shhhh no one saw)

The thing is, I had to write this chapter right. I **HAD** to. Because it really is key to the end of the fic, with quite a few answers. I was so afraid of doing it wrong, and I'm still afraid I didn't do it justice, so please, *pleeeeeeease*, let me know at the end in your review? I'm begging.

According to my counts, we have 2 more chapters and an epilogue left, but you never know. Fingers crossed. Also, my semester ends in a couple of weeks, so circle of prayer for my writing being restored to a 20 days gap.

Enough blabbing, you're not here for this. Enjoy the chapter!

WINTER

"*Troubled spirits on my chest where they laid to rest (…)*
Said goodbye to you, my friend, as the fire spread.
All that's left are your bones that will soon sink like stones.
So hold on, hold on to what you are. Hold on to your heart."

Of Monsters and Men – *Your Bones*

9. the madness in our wake

December, 1986

Elle Hopper

She realized the difference as soon as she stepped beyond the box on the ground. El passed by it looking back once, the same way she passes by the box by her window every day. She'd been telling herself that the reason she hadn't taken that box to Mike's house yet was because she kept finding his things in random parts of the house, but to hell with that excuse.

Elle Hopper didn't want to let Mike Wheeler go.

Even though she should. Even though that very morning Pat Curry had stopped by her locker before class and put a flower in her hair and kissed her cheek.

That afternoon, when El got home and found Joyce there cradling Callie with a lullaby on her tongue, she finally let out the question.

"Did you actually get over Hopper the first time around?"

Which got a confused look from her adoptive mother.

"We found your high school yearbook, you know?" El continued, dropping her bag on the couch. "It says that you and Hopper were together, but then you went and married Lonnie, and Hop moved to Indianapolis. Did you get over him? And how?"

Joyce offered her a comprehensive smile then.

"Oh, Ellie," she said lovingly. "Part of you will forever be in love with your first love, because it was when everything changed, when you never could be the same again. Understand?"

No. Well, maybe a little bit.

"I don't know, Mom," she said pouting. "It doesn't sound very nice, this prospect."

"Look, there's no shame in taking your time to find someone else, and you're not alone in those feelings, baby. A lot of people felt the way you do right now."

"Did you?"

Joyce smiled again and nodded as she swayed Callie to the right and to the left ever so smoothly. El had turned to the corridor then, willing to grab a warmer jacket for later. She'd need it.

"Ellie," Joyce had called and the girl turned around. "We can talk more, you know? Whenever you want."

"I know," she answered and nodded.

El almost tripped on a branch and that was the only reason she took her eyes from the box in the woods where so many times she believed she was getting her last meal out of. There weren't monsters after her when she crawled out of that hole – not the usual ones, at least, faceless and powerful. Just the normal kind of monsters, the ones she was used to, the ones who raised her since she was a baby.

All of them but one.

El focused on the path ahead of her knowing that the one would show up as well, eventually. He was hiding, but he was one of the whisperers.

She knew it because he was the only one who dared call her name.

"You okay?" Mike asked when she crossed her arms, putting her jacket tighter around herself. El nodded.

"Fine," she answered.

Winter would only start in a couple of weeks, but the night was falling faster upon them already. *It's the northern way*, Mike had told her the previous year, both of them sitting on the roof of his house, his close breath keeping her cheek warm. It had been their first snowfall of December at the time, after a couple of surprisingly warm days, no rain at all. Different from the ice layer all around this year.

He had invited her to the roof and together they waited for the sun to set, and when it did he told her about the first stars of the night, her head rested on his arm, his face so close to hers. He talked and talked the way he always did and she processed only half of it, more concentrated on the vibration of his chest and how his voice cracked sometimes. El remembered the thought that was in her head that

night as if it had happened just hours ago.

She had thought, *if I turn around right now, I can kiss him*. And she thought, *if I start kissing him now, I don't think I could ever stop*.

She thought those things in a loop over and over and over until she had the courage to actually turn her head in his direction and their noses touched and his eyes were so black, and she kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him sure that if anyone interrupted them she would never stop.

That memory was red and blue in her chest, both happy and sad. Like right now, when they were about to test their luck.

"Don't worry, El, it's going to work," Mike assured with a smile that told her that he too wasn't so sure, but he did have a lot of faith.

It was different, the place, and it had only been a week since they went there. The clearing had no sign of Chinese lanterns or red cups, the stones and logs were back where they belonged. It was relieved. Happy, even.

El took a deep breath and released the air slowly. She only realized that she had closed her eyes when she opened them again and faced Will, who was standing in front of her with a big smile.

"I fixed it," he told her. "Dustin helped me."

"More like I did the fixing while he bossed me around," Dustin corrected.

"I was the only one who knew what was wrong!" Will exclaimed and then flinched.

He was in pain, a lot of it, but since it was a special occasion, he was downplaying it for the others.

Once upon a time, Joyce was pushing a baby out with all her will and Jim Hopper, the Chief, passed out halfway through it. The mother turned to El during one of those in-between moments of peace, took in El's wonder and said – *Men can never take pain, sweetheart. That's why we don't let them know the half of it*.

El believed her.

Those boys, they were her best friends, but they couldn't handle it, they would never be able to deal with it – the voices, the changes, the gore. It was too much.

Only Will understood it, but Will was different. He was barely human. And like women, he cared too much. Too nice to survive, and yet that was the *only* reason he was still alive.

Well, maybe not the *only* reason. But certainly the stronger one.

Lucas opened the door to the warehouse and tested the switch, verifying that the lights were working fine. They all followed him inside and found the heating system. The small stage the band had used at the Seniors' party was still there, so Will sat on it and Lucas used it as a table to open the little kit he took from the inside pocket of his jacket.

"That's all?" El asked referring to the vial, standing next to her brother. Lucas nodded. "And you know how to use those things?" she pointed at the syringes.

"My dad has diabetes," he explained. "Everyone at home knows how to use needles. This is his secondary kit bag, it keeps the temperature cool because of the insulin, so I think it's going to work fine."

Will nodded and took off his jacket.

"Let's do this."

"What are you doing?" Mike asked watching Will take off his shirt too.

"You said that it'd be good to apply the venom in the same place it was applied before." He pointed at the scar on his chest. "To mimic what happened the first time around. Hit me."

They all moved a little uncomfortably on their feet. El indicated for Will to lay down. The heating system was taking too long to kick in and he already was starting to shiver, but they didn't have the whole night.

"Start with 50ml," Mike instructed and Lucas nodded taking the vial of venom with all the caution he could muster.

The scar was right above Will's heart, three gushes of new, smooth skin. It was so close to his heart that no one understood how the venom didn't kill him on the spot – it had killed others before, but Will survived, he even got better.

Now they knew why. More importantly, knew *how*.

And the how was the important part, because it worked in their advantage.

"Okay, Byers," Lucas said with the needle at his eye level as he checked the volume. "You ready?"

"That's how I was born, baby," Will replied, and El shook her head. "Too much?"

"Too much," she agreed taking his hand.

Lucas gulped and Will nodded reassuringly. Part of El knew it was about time they had a solution, part of her was scared to death. Will tightened his grip on her hand and she leaned closer to him.

"You must go on," she recited so low only he should hear, but with the silence in the large room, probably everyone heard her.

"I will go on," he told her, and then he looked at Lucas. "You're not growing soft on me, are you, Sinclair?"

Lucas scoffed and placed the syringe, his right hand on Will's chest for support, the needle pointed to the central cut. He and Mike had studied Will's drawings of the displacer and consulted their memory, trying to figure out how it applied its venom in the victims, but El wasn't sure if the boys got to some sort of solution. Lucas took a deep breath, Will let out the air he had locked in his lungs slowly. It was cold in there, but his hand was sweating in hers.

And then the needle was in, the venom following right after.

No one said or did anything for a minute. No one even moved, they

just waited and nothing happened.

"How are you feeling?" El asked and Will shrugged.

"Underwhelmed, really," he said. "Is that it?"

"You got a mice shot," Dustin said.

"Maybe we should try a little more," Mike added. "I mean, we *were* going to anyway, but we would wait to see the effects."

"There are no effects," Will said firmly.

Mike and Lucas exchanged a look. Mike was the science guy, Lucas was just the person who knew how to use needles. If anyone knew better, it would be Mike. He nodded.

"Try 70ml on the same spot, and then we divide the rest equally in the side scars," he instructed and Lucas got to work.

The second dose was less tense than the first; they all seemed to be breathing more evenly by the time the third dose began to be prepared.

El took a moment to look around the warehouse and take in the place. She wondered if when the Seniors found it for rent, they also found the thin mattress and ratty sheets that used to be by the heater. She wondered what had been done with it.

During the Christmas of 1984, Hopper caught her off guard. He wasn't supposed to enter the warehouse, and whenever he came to bring her food or a blanket, she'd make sure to hide, but this time she was feeling so weak and wobbly that she didn't try to move, thinking that he wouldn't try the handle.

He did. Luckily, she had her back to the door and just a little snow flew in. She pretended to be asleep. Hopper stepped close and kneeled by her side, checking her breathing and temperature. He took off his jacket and covered her, and then he left some warm food by her head on the floor.

El still remembered what it was: mashed potatoes, pumpkin with

ham, black rice and apple pie for dessert. She thought it over for a moment. Maybe she already knew what to give Hop this year.

Will shifted on the improvised stage, changing his grip on El's hand and she looked at him again. He was starting to sweat all over, and he looked uncomfortable.

"How was it the other time?" El asked Will. "When it hit you, how did you feel? Pain?"

"To be honest, I don't know," Will answered. "I was knocked out and by the time I woke up, the paramedics were already dragging me to the ambulance and giving me morphine."

The boys exchanged a look and El narrowed her eyes at them. Dustin was the one to talk.

"You don't remember?" he asked and Will frowned.

"Remember wh-" Will's question was cut short by a gasp and his head snapped back.

"Will?" El called. He had let go of her hand and started to spasm.

"Hold him down!" Lucas commanded. Dustin and Mike struggled to get a grip on him. "Hold him the fuck down, we have to apply all the venom."

"Do we, really?" Dustin asked and all the other three turned to him.

"YES!" they shouted.

"It's okay," Will managed to gasp, sitting up. "I can take it, I-"

His leg kicked and he almost dropped the vial on the floor, but El prevented it from crashing with her mind. Lucas hurried to grab everything and put it a safe distance from Will. Mike and Dustin were still struggling to hold him down.

"You guys knew about this?" El asked, but she got no answer. "Michael."

"He threw up!" Mike said. "It's how we found out about the slugs."

"Just that? Just throwing up?" she pressed.

No one wanted to answer her, and Will had more spasms, knocking Dustin off his feet. El turned to him and with a head motion she pushed Mike away. She focused on Will, forcing him to lay down and keep still. He was still trembling, clearly in pain, and she hovered her hands above his body trying to read him.

It was all over him and protesting. It wanted to live and they were killing it.

It was working.

El lined with Will's head and leaned over, pushing his hair back and resting her forehead on his.

"I'm sorry," El said and then she looked at Lucas, gesturing for him to approach.

Lucas needed to take a few breaths before calming down enough to point the needle to Will's chest again. El kept caressing his hair, trying to make him focus on her.

Will was fighting her, but she was stronger. She even knew that his fight wasn't really *his*, it was *its*. She knew that the real Will wanted for it to go.

"It's almost done," she told him, her voice soft. "Everything. Everything is coming to an end."

"You promise?" Will asked. El nodded.

"Promise."

She looked at Mike then, knowing damn well what happened the last time words like those had been exchanged. She tried to pass him a new message just through her eyes. It'd be different this time. It'd be completely different this time, and she would make sure of it.

"Done," Lucas said, taking them from their reverie and the moment he

said that, the lights went down.

It lasted only a couple of seconds, but long enough to distract El from her hold on Will. When the lights came back on and the heating system kicked back up loudly, El felt Will's arm around her waist, pushing her away before he leaned over the edge of the stage and vomited on the floor.

Only a couple of hours later, after a lot of sweat and fever and tears, Lucas drove them home in his brand new old Cadillac, his hands still shaking every time he looked at El through the rear view mirror, Will's head on her shoulder.

They hopped out without a word and she led him to his room. Instead of going to her room, El got him some water and filled the bucket by his bed before she set camp on Jonathan's bed.

"Ellie," Will called, his voice hoarse.

"Go to sleep, bro," she said smiling. "I won't leave."

The next morning, El woke up with the sun hitting her face shyly which could be a good sign; when Will was feeling sick, he couldn't stand the light, and if he had been feeling sick now, he'd complain until the curtains were closed.

El stretched in the bed and got up lazily, her hair a mess. She didn't sleep very well, but she only had 48 hours to turn over the last essays for English and writing before winter break, and she really needed that private with Mike. She went to her bedroom where Joyce was feeding Callie with a smile.

"Morning," she greeted yawning and it was like Joyce was glowing.

"Morning, baby," Joyce said. "Did you see Will?"

"Not yet. Looking good?"

Joyce leaned over to whisper her reply.

"He's humming, and smiling! And eating! Ellie, it's a *miracle*!"

"Early Christmas, maybe?" El joked and Joyce nodded, ignoring the girl's tone.

"Go get ready or you'll be late," she ushered instead and so El did.

When she went to the kitchen to eat breakfast, Will was making pancakes and dramatically singing along to the tune of Luther Vandross on the radio, a cigarette between his lips. She couldn't help but smile.

"I'm guessing you slept well," she said as she handed him a plate.

"Better than I had in months, to be honest," Will replied. He managed to put her pancakes on her plate without dropping any ashes on them. "I'm not 100% yet, but have you heard the phrase 'fake it until you make it'?"

El nodded, reaching for the maple syrup on top of the fridge. He had said that to her in a call while she was camping, his little piece of advice as to how to get over her break up.

"You know, Mom is so happy you're fine, I think she won't even mind you're smoking."

"That's what I'm counting on, Ellie," he said turning off the stove. Will poured him a mug of black coffee and sat with her while she ate. "Yesterday, I was feeling like shit, but I feel like it's working. I think it's going to work."

"Yeah, temporarily," El agreed. "We have to find a way to get the thessal out of your system while the displacer's venom is repressing it."

Will sighed and she held his hand tenderly. She didn't want to upset him, but they had to be reasonable about what they were facing. The venom in high concentration held his transformation back in a couple of years, but the dose they found wouldn't hold on for too long. With the clock ticking, they were getting close to all of the heads being ready and coming to get him.

Once they had their hands on Will, the thessalmonster would be unstoppable.

There was no way in hell El would let that happen again.

"One day at a time, right?" she said sweetly and Will smiled nodding.

"WILLIAM BYERS!" Joyce shouted from the door of the kitchen. "Who said you could smoke in the house?"

Later that afternoon, that was the story El was relating to Mike between laughs as they headed to Hawkins Library to study. They went up to the study rooms where they could chat with a little more liberty than downstairs.

"So the next thing I know, Mom is taking the cigarette from him and throwing it in his coffee, making him get up to get ready for school," she said leaving her backpack on one of the chairs and sitting down on another. Only then El looked up and saw Mike staring at her. "What?"

"Do you realize what you're doing?" he asked and she frowned. "El, you're telling a story."

"Yeah…?" she said, feeling very confused. Mike smiled.

"What you do out loud is what you have to do on paper." He opened his backpack and took out a notebook before he sat by her side. El groaned.

"Mike…" how many times did she have to tell him that she was no storyteller?

"No, El, look," he said taking her hand. "You said you have a hard time imagining things and I've been approaching it wrong. Maybe… all you have to do is *tell*."

He pushed the notebook in her direction and anxiously El got a pencil out of her bag.

"Tell me about last night," Mike said.

"You know about last night," she replied looking at him. He was still holding her hand and his finger brushed the ring on her index finger.

Mike looked down at their hands and saw that she was wearing the ring he gave her again, and El's heart fluttered. He didn't say anything, but held her hand a little tighter, his thumb tracing the ring lightly.

He was wavering, she could tell.

He looked in her eyes and she felt goosebumps all over her body. *Oh, that was bad.*

"I know," Mike said quietly. "But tell me anyway, from your point of view. Tell me what happened and what was in your mind."

El opened her mouth, but Mike shook his head and pointed at the notebook, letting go of her hand.

"Write as if you're talking out loud, and we'll work from there."

"You want me to tell what was in my mind?" she asked just to make sure and he nodded.

El rolled the pencil between two fingers for a moment staring at the notebook, and then she opened it, looking for a blank page. Half of the notebook was filled with Mike's scribes for new campaigns that he didn't know when they'd be able to play. She found a page more in the middle and flattened its corner.

Last night, she thought, she had a lot in her mind. She didn't know where to start. She never knew where to start. Frustrated, El sighed putting her free hand on her temple.

Normally, Mike would give her space to write, but this time he leaned closer, his face near hers. El didn't dare turn in his direction.

"Talk to me," he said and she closed her eyes, took a deep breath. And then she started to write.

It was freezing cold, and the ground was covered in ice at the northern woods last night, she wrote remembering one of his first tips of setting the landscape; Mike gave her space, even though he stayed close. *The way the sun insisted on setting early made me think of you.*

El was halfway through the page, her small, round calligraphy filling the lines as she poured down her thoughts, when Mike decided to leave her alone for a bit. She didn't know how much he had read over her shoulder, but she guessed he'd seen enough to know that she was wavering too. She'd been wavering from the start.

She turned the page and saw on the following sheet a doodle of an ugly gremlin that made her smile. Distracted, El closed the notebook and went back to the first page, taking a good look at Mike's writing. He was so good at it, it was annoying, but adorable at the same time. Will had told her that his campaigns were getting more and more complex, deep and layered as the years passed. He said that maybe Mike would be able to write his own DM book someday, if he kept it up.

El came across a page that caught her attention and read through it, repeating one of the lines a few times.

The Red Shadow Dragon had once been Copper, pouring goodness and camaraderie, but now all it knew was raging angst boiled in revenge.

"What are you reading?" Mike asked coming back to the room and El looked up at him.

"Is this your new campaign?" she asked instead and he shrugged.

"I don't know. All I have are scattered ideas at the moment. Did you finish writing?"

"No," El said looking back at the page and reading about the dragon again.

Mike was silent for a while and he sat by her side again, his body turned to her.

"You always do that, reading my campaigns beforehand-" she shushed him unapologetically and he frowned. Mike shook his head. "Actually, I was asking which book you're reading this time. I know you always have one with you."

"Oh," she said. El used a finger to mark where she'd stopped on the page and dug her backpack with her free hand until she found the

thin book. She pulled it out and handed it to him.

"Molloy again?" Mike said surprised, flipping through the pages carefully. "The lines you and Will quoted… they're from the *Trilogy*, aren't they?"

El nodded.

"I didn't know you'd read it," she said giving up on her reading.

"Will was obsessed with it a couple of years ago, but I can't tell I enjoyed it much."

They were silent for a moment, El slowly going through the pages of Mike's notebook. He wasn't as good an artist as Will, but he had a nice vision of the world he was creating there. She sniffed and frowned.

"Were you smoking?" El asked.

"…Yes," Mike replied and she scoffed.

"I can't believe I got Hop and Joyce to quit just to have you dumbasses starting," she commented and in the corner of her eye she saw Mike smile.

"Look, I just wanted the quiet for a few minutes," he argued and El looked at him.

"We're at the library," she replied in a heartbeat and his smile widened.

"You know, you're very familiar with this place," Mike said tilting his head. "I don't remember a single week since you came back that you didn't have a book with you. What makes you read so much?"

El bit the inside of her cheek, leaving the notebook open on the page she had been writing earlier and looked at him.

"Mostly vocabulary," she confessed. "It helps with learning more about human interactions too, but I still struggle, and most of the time I don't really understand them – the stories. Like, what the fuck

is Jane Austen's goal?"

Mike snorted, but cut his laugh short when something hit him.

"Are you telling me that you understand Beckett better than Austen?" he asked. El didn't know why he was so shocked. She nodded. "*How?* His writing is a mess."

"Exactly," she pointed at him. "He's a mess. Like me, like in here," El pointed at her own head. "Samuel Beckett, Jack Kerouac, James Joyce, those are the people I get, because they just keep *fucking going*."

"James Joyce is a trip, he gives me headaches," Mike confessed under his breath and El smirked. She knew.

"That's the only thing I know, Mike," she said to him. "The mess. But I can't Kerouac the shit out of creative writing. This is considered nothing but a tool." She pointed at the book he had left on the table and looked at it suddenly sad. It was such a shame that the things she was good at weren't enough. El leaned back and looked at Mike's notebook. "I wish I could write like you."

"But do you even like my writing?" Mike asked frowning. "I mean, you totally dispensed my campaigns over and over."

"Didn't I ask you to write them?" El asked, tilting her head as she looked at him. Mike blushed a little.

"Well, yes, but-"

He was interrupted by her little scoff, for she understood something. She understood that she had had that conversation before, but with his sister instead of him. She understood that he didn't know her whys, so he kept adding buts. Maybe it was about time to tell him.

"Oh, Mike," El said reaching out and holding his hand. "You have no idea, do you?"

"No idea of what?" he asked suspiciously.

"Mike, where do you get the idea for these campaigns? And don't

answer me D&D books."

That caught him off guard, she could tell by his posture and the way he raised both eyebrows. She wanted him to think hard of that answer, for he deserved to know. Mike looked down at her hand in his and covered it with his other hand, his thumb rubbing her wrist.

"I don't know," he finally answered. "Sometimes I dream of something, sometimes… the ideas just appear to me or whatever."

"Don't you get it, Mike?" El asked, her other hand reaching to touch his face, cupping his cheek. When she spoke again, it was in a whisper. "You've got a gift."

"What? No," he said with a nervous laugh. "No, Ellie, I just write, I'm… I don't, I'm ordinary."

El leaned closer to him, her fingers tracing the lines of his cheekbone and the freckles on his skin. She couldn't help but smile at his naivety. And to think that she was considered the innocent one.

"There's nothing ordinary about you, Mike Wheeler," she said in mesmerized wonder. "The way you see, sense and interpret things, haven't you noticed? You're the orchestrator of it all, like a…"

El looked down, the connections being made in her head after all and making her frown. Mike caught his breath and she looked at him again, realizing that she was all over him when she shouldn't. Wide eyed, El gasped and leaned back.

"Like a Lich," she concluded.

Mike frowned, but he didn't have the chance to react, because something occurred to her and she got up so fast he barely processed it. El gathered her things in record time and tore the page from Mike's notebook, shoving it in her backpack.

"Hey!" he protested.

"I gotta go," she said, closing the zipper.

"But your essay, you have to turn it in in two days!" Mike reminded

her and El nodded.

"It's okay, I've got this."

"How-" he shook his head. "I need to see what you wrote."

El put the backpack over her shoulder and shook her head.

"There's no way I'm letting you read that," she said smiling. "But don't worry, we'll meet again tomorrow? I just… really need to call my mom. It's important." She turned to the door and even took a few steps towards it, but then she turned to him again. "Mike," El called. He was looking at her stunned.

She didn't know what to say, though. The words failed her once again, but this time it didn't bother her.

"Talk later, okay?" she opted to say and he nodded.

Filled with something similar to hope – hell, maybe similar to the hope she felt from the boys the night before - El rushed towards the exit. She had to talk to Terry, and maybe talk to Nancy and Jon too, to give them some angle in their search – if there was a way to channel her thoughts into action, that was it.

At last, she thought, at last somewhere solid to go.

xxx

Nancy Wheeler

The thing about Jonathan Byers' car was that there was nothing in heaven or earth that could heat up its insides, so whenever Nancy had to ride with him during winter, she had to make sure to put on her warmest clothes and bring along at least one blanket. *At least* one.

The temperatures were dropping like crazy on the east coast, more drastically than the previous year, and sometimes she regretted the suggestion of getting out of the dorm. Her freezing Hawkins sounded so warm these days.

Jonathan had put on some blues to play. He had been in this groovy

vibe for a while now, and Nancy still had to get used to car rides without his usual punk, but she had to admit that it set tone quite nicely as the big cities gave away to green and small towns near the Turnpike.

The almost 2 hour drive to Mt. Laurel had to be stretched because of the icy road, for Nancy's distaste. She already had been through 9 awful hours on the bus from Portland to Manhattan, certainly no medium was worth all that trouble.

Nancy looked over at Jonathan again. His gloved hands gripped the steering wheel with concentration, his eyes on the road. She had only taken the Turnpike once to go to Philadelphia to see the Independence Hall. Jonathan was the example of tranquility, but she knew him well enough to understand the lock of his jaw and the sharpness in his eyes.

"This is nice," she said, bringing her knees to her chest in order to wrap the blanket around her more neatly. Without even glancing at her, Jon chuckled.

"I'm sorry I didn't get the heater fixed," he said with a smile and Nancy shrugged.

"I wasn't expecting you would," she replied and watched him release the air from his lungs slowly, relaxing just a little bit. Nancy looked out her window again. If the weather was nicer, she'd stick her arm out and surf in the wind, but it was almost freezing and she'd like to keep her fingers intact. "It looks so different from spring."

"That's how seasons work, Nance," Jon replied seriously. "It's gonna be cold in the winter."

Nancy rolled her eyes, but smiled anyway. Sometimes, Jonathan would let out jokes with this monotone and blank expression that would unsettle any outsider, but Nancy was used to his odd humor. As a matter of fact, the most serious he'd say something, the funnier it'd get.

They passed by a plaque indicating the distance to Mont Holly, Mt. Laurel, Cherry Hill and Philadelphia. The car went by too fast for

Nancy to read all the distances, but she supposed they were almost halfway there. Cherry Hill and Philadelphia were the places you could find Moira Flint, the medium recognized by Roscoe Grayson, but her house was in Mt. Laurel.

Nancy had her address written down in her notebook among other names she had found in a file at Professor Vogel's office. The list of people that provided him information about the ley lines and the versequakes that were shaking Maine's energy.

Only two names had caught Nancy's attention, even though she copied the whole list – Moira's and Nicholas Heron, who Mike had told her recently was the man from the museum's creepy exhibit with the weird skeleton.

(The skeleton, El had told her on a different occasion, of a deceased demogorgon found on the propriety of a Flint family. One didn't have to be very bright to start making the connections when they were laid in front of one like that.)

Heron didn't have an address among his info, and Nancy wasn't intimate enough with Professor Vogel to know what all of his notes meant, so she decided to try the second best thing, and that would be Moira. Hence, the freezing trip in the second week of December, when they should be studying for finals.

Nancy looked at Jonathan again, at the way he was biting his lip as he drove, his nose red with the cold and the little pout he made when his lower lip stopped being busied by his teeth. Of course they wanted to make this trip in the spring, with warm weather and flower blossoms, but they were running out of time.

How many lives, she kept wondering knowing that her boyfriend wondered the same since he found out about the return of the slugs and the return of the dead, Will Byers had left at this point? They weren't willing to wait around to find out.

Moira Flint high key could be a dead end. She could have no clue whatsoever as to what they could do to help Jonathan's little brother. But she had been part of MK Ultra and they wouldn't give chance a chance.

"Jon," Nancy said softly and he dared to look at her briefly, offering her a sweet smile.

"This leap of faith is going to work, Nance," he said with certainty and it made her heart flutter.

He was determined the way he had been when they dared walk through Hawkins woods at night three years ago with only a bat and a revolver, and she loved that about him, that willingness to go beyond the borders of his comfort zone to *do* something.

"I know," she replied, even though she didn't, not really.

Sometimes, faith was their best shot.

They didn't talk much the rest of the trip, letting the soft sound of guitars and pianos fill in the gaps of their conversation as they entered in Mt. Laurel and tried to figure out the city's map in order to find the house.

They ended up in a suburban neighborhood with small houses and children on the streets wrapped in warm clothes and shouting at the snowfall, and parked in front of a colorful house with a pink fence. Jonathan turned off the engine as Nancy started to roll the blanket, sad to leave that layer of warmth in the car, and then they hopped out.

"Is that it?" Jon asked and Nancy nodded, pointing at the mailbox with the word FLINT in uppercase letters.

"Looks like," she said. They exchanged a look and she took his hand in hers, lacing her fingers with his. "You ready?"

"Yes," he said without falter, and then stepped decidedly towards the house.

They crossed the small gate, climbed up the front steps and rang the bell twice. Different from anything Nancy had imagined, Jonathan held her hand with no tremble, and he stood tall, with his head high. This, right here, was important to him. This was about his family and he would not step down.

On the other side of the door there was noise, chatter, and when it opened, they were welcomed by this really calm music and the smell of incense. The woman that greeted them was a little taller than Nancy, with striking black hair and eyes, skin as white as the moon. Everything about her reinforced her stage name of Nixe of the Night. Jonathan had told Nancy about her, but now she realized she hadn't fully grasped his description. In front of her stood a woman who looked both innocent and powerful, all knowing, maybe beyond her years. She looked ageless.

It was intimidating.

"Hello, Nixe," Jon greeted with a somewhat charming smile. "Remember me? We talked on the phone."

"Jonathan Byers," Moira said. She was wearing a purple cashmere over a long flower dress and gave them space to get in. "Of course, come on in!"

They left their jackets in the hall and passed by a TV room where two kids with blonde hair were watching cartoons and paid little to no attention to them. Moira led them to the back of the house, to the kitchen where the oven was on and they could begin to notice the smell of pumpkin pie; probably left over from the Halloween crops like it used to happen at Nancy's home.

The room was awfully warm compared to the outside world, explaining Moira's bare feet, and the soothing music came from a boxy radio on the sink.

"Are they your kids?" Nancy asked after being introduced and offered a seat by the flour dusted table. The kids looked nothing like Moira, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

The psychic shook her head no.

"My niece and nephew. I look after them for my sister a couple times a week, that's how you found me home. Apple tea?"

Nancy was about to say no, but Jonathan was quicker.

"Yes, please," he said removing his gloves. Nancy already had shoved

hers in her pockets, the warmth of that house was comforting after so many hours in the car. "With cream and sugar if possible."

Moira smiled. She put water in the kettle and put it on the stove, got a couple of green apples, a pot of honey and some cinnamon. She got a cutting board and a kitchen knife, and then she started cutting the apples in teeny tiny pieces, skin and all.

"I like having the kids over, because they shed light in such different angles, don't you agree?" Moira said as she cut the apples. "Besides, just between us here, I think *Kevin has the sight*."

She said the last words in a whisper, as if it was a secret, and Nancy wondered why they were the ones she was telling it to. Nancy watched as Moira finished cutting the apples so effortlessly as she spoke, reach for a frying pan and put the pieces in it before taking it to the stove. That… was not how Nancy knew to do apple tea.

"It's very rare, you know? Men getting the sight. I've only ever met one my whole life."

She added a spoon of honey and cinnamon to the apples, kept the temperature low and opened the fridge, getting the milk out as the mixture cooked.

"And only heard of another, of course," Moira continued talking as if they were aware of everything she was saying. She got the sugar from a shelf, left it on the table. "Or sensed him, if I'd put it like that. But I knew it was just a matter of time until we had another one in my family too, I just didn't expect it to be K!"

Nancy looked at Jonathan, who just shook his head subtly, a gesture meant for her to wait. Him being the one who met Moira before, she followed his lead. She reached for the inside of her jacket and pulled her notebook and pen out, the beaten down pages already cracking from so much use and folding.

"You seem to know quite a few sighted men for such a rare ability," Nancy wondered out loud trying to stretch out the pages of her notepad and she looked up just in time to see Moira put back on a shelf a pot labeled "GINGER". The smell of the spice immediately

rose, mixed with the apples and cinnamon. With her back to them, Moira shrugged.

"I'm surprised myself," she said sincerely, stewing the pan with a wooden spoon. "Lone Ranger, what brought you back to me?" she asked without looking back at them.

Lone Ranger? Nancy looked at Jonathan, who shrugged. She uncapped her pen and was ready for business. He cleared his throat.

"We know you help Carmine Vogel with his versequake theory, and we were wondering…" Jonathan drifted off when Moira turned around to look at them frowning. She put a hand on top of the sugar pot, drumming her fingers on it as if in consideration. "Well, do you remember Roscoe Grayson?"

Moira scowled then and she scoffed.

"Yeah, I remember that fraud," she said dismissively. "Talk about a crappy human being."

Nancy and Jon exchanged another look and Moira turned to get another pan from under the sink. She poured milk into it and put it on the stove to heat, taking the wooden spoon from the frying pan to rest it on top of the milk pan. She turned off the stove mouth and lidded the pan.

Nancy was confused, to say the least, because Steve had been so certain about Roscoe when he got in touch, it was a little hard to believe that the man would be such fake, and incredible how much disgust Moira expressed towards him in just a few words. But again, none of them had interacted with these people more than a few hours, so it was hard to really get to know them. She wrote down "*RG not reliable?*" in a rushed handwrite on top of a clean page, and then added the date. December 12, 1986.

"How so?" Nancy asked and Jonathan looked at her frowning. She was in full detective mode now.

Moira's mouth contracted in a thin line, revealing her age a little. That woman was Nancy's father's age, maybe a little younger, but she

had hardly looked like it up until now. They had a good guess why the turn – it was the single hardest thing to have Terry talking about her time at the MK Ultra project. Not even El, the daughter born from that time, had success in getting something out of the woman.

"What about Terry Ives?" Jonathan asked, as if reading Nancy's mind. "Do you remember her?"

At the mention of Terry's name, Moira opened a small smile. She turned the stove off, stirred the milk with the same wooden spoon she used to mix everything as she grabbed for a glass jar on a shelf. They waited for her answer watching her put the apple in the jar and add the hot water up until the half of it. She put a lid on the jar and it immediately started to foam.

"Nixe," Jonathan said carefully, sounding as soft as Nancy knew his heart was. "There's something going on with my little brother and we're seeking all the help we can get, but if you don't answer… we're wasting time. We're tripping here, Nixe, and codes won't help. We don't have the time anymore."

Moira looked intently at Jonathan, making a point to ignore Nancy's presence, and sat down in front of them putting the jar of tea and the pot of sugar aside. She put her arms on the table and then ran a hand through her hair, showing the white powder of flour all over her sleeve.

"It's a delicate matter, Ranger," she finally said with a little tremble in her voice that hadn't been there before. "I don't like to remember that time."

It looked like a helpless situation was developing in front of her and Nancy worried it had been a bad idea to come at all. The smell of pumpkin pie dominated the kitchen as it baked, all strong spices and sugar. Restless, Nancy spoke up.

"I believe you know history happens in cycles," she said catching Moira's attention. "And if you're watching things unfold as you insinuate you are, I think you realize we're at the vortices of a new one. You've lived the first cycle, Ms. Moira, and we could really use your knowledge."

"Seer," Moira replied with a tone of correction. Nancy frowned. "I'm not watching, I'm seeing. Because I'm a seer."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Jonathan asked curiously.

"People with the sight are different because clairvoyance comes on a spectrum," Moira explained. "There are watchers and seers, reachers, shadowers, blinders, spreaders, just to name a few."

"Which one is Roscoe?" Nancy asked, just to confirm her theory. Moira narrowed her eyes at her.

"None," she said firmly. Theory confirmed. "Like I said, men with the sight are extremely rare. Usually, they lack the tact to understand the extent of this gift. Women predominance is a matter of survival of the fittest. I've only ever met one man that knew what he was doing."

"How did Roscoe end up at MK Ultra then?" asked Jonathan frowning. Nancy let him do the talking as she scribed in her notepad fiercely, careful to add a very important question in her notes – *who is* he*?*

"Money?" Moira said with a disgusted expression. "Drugs? Could be anything. I'm happy he got screwed over at the end."

The pen slipped in Nancy's hand, so quickly her head shot up, shocked at the bitterness in Moira's words. She really disliked that Roscoe guy. A timer started to beep, so the woman got up and turned off the oven after she checked the pie. It smelled amazing and looked even better when she put it on the sink's stone.

"How old is your little brother, Lone Ranger?" Moira asked getting a set of mismatched teacups and putting them on the table.

"Fifteen," Jonathan answered, busying to get his cup and Nancy's in front of them. Moira nodded.

She got an extra couple of teacups and five dessert plates equally mismatched, putting everything on the table.

"He's…" Jonathan said lowering his eyes, his finger tracing the rim of the cup. "Been through a lot, the little guy."

Sympathetically, Moira reached out and touched Jonathan's wrist, turning his palm up. She traced the lines with long, delicate fingers.

"So much sorrow," the woman said, her voice small. Nancy looked up at her frowning at seeing her teared eyes. Moira took a deep breath and headed to the door of the kitchen. "Jackie! Kevin! Tea time!"

They heard the hurried patting of small feet and the kids were in the kitchen almost immediately, taking seats and passing plates with noisy agitation, even though they weren't talking. Nancy guessed the boy was around 12 and the girl was a little younger, and she hummed curiously observing them. Jonathan took her teacup to fill and put it back in front of her almost without her noticing.

"There something you want to say, Ms. Nancy?" Moira asked softly, but there was a certain substance in her words.

"How old are you, Kevin?" Nancy asked and the boy looked at her surprised to be addressed by a stranger.

"I just turned twelve," he said. His voice still held that childish tone, like Mike's had when he was this age. Nancy looked at Jonathan.

"Will was twelve when it happened," he said frowning. Moira, who was cutting the pie in equal parts, just nodded.

"When what happened?" Kevin asked turning to his aunt. She messed his hair playfully, blonde strands sticking in every direction.

"Found out he was a spreader, baby boy," Moira said casually. Nancy wrote the word down so fast she was afraid she wouldn't understand her calligraphy later.

"I have never ever heard of spreaders, Aunt Mo," the girl, Jackie, said, her elbow on the table and plate ready for a piece of pie. "Not even in the diaries."

"Spreaders come when they are needed. Usually, they don't even develop their clairvoyance," Moira explained.

"How do you know that's what he is?" Jonathan asked, edge in his voice.

"I told you," Moira said calmly. "I felt him. Spreaders can be felt from very far away, just like reachers."

"So you are a seer," Nancy said taking note. "Will is a spreader, Roscoe is nothing. What do these names mean?"

"It's all about time," Jackie spoke up again. She seemed to know a lot about these things. Moira busied in distributing the pie for everyone as the girl explained. "Seers have a glimpse of the future, while watchers have a glimpse of the present. Blinders are tricksters, benders of time like hypnotists, while shadowers are skilled skippers, good at avoiding. They are pretty hard to find."

"Spreaders, like your little brother," Moira said sitting down again, this time at the head of the table. "Amplify everything."

"That's what El told him," Jonathan cut in, borderline excited for having a little bit of information to share. "This summer, she told him he enhances her powe-" he cut himself short, knowing he had just overshared.

The kids were attacking their hot pies with ferocity. Jon looked over at Nancy worriedly and they both looked at Moira. Too busy taking notes, Nancy's tea and pie were cooling in front of her and to her surprise, Jonathan's food was untouched also. The seer smiled at them, cutting a bite of pie with a fork.

"Oh yeah, Terry's girl," she said calmly. "One of the strongest reachers I've ever felt. Only met one like her my whole life."

"Is Terry a reacher?" Nancy asked and Moira shook her head no.

"Aunt, where's the cream?" asked Kevin putting some sugar in his tea and Moira got up quickly to get the warm milk from the stove. She rested it in the middle of the table by the pie and the tea. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said and then turned to Jonathan and Nancy again. "Terry was never that high in the ranking, but she was really skilled. She's a watcher and she was the one who found me. Well…" she drifted out for a moment watching the bite of pie in her fork.

"They came at the same time, practically. And combusted almost instantaneously too."

"They who?" Jon asked frowning. Moira looked at him.

"Terry and Nicholas. It was as if it was written."

"Nicholas as in Nicholas Heron?" Nancy asked, flipping a few pages back in her notebook. Moira confirmed with a nod, her mouth full. "He's a historian."

"*If only he was just that*," Moira said bitterly reaching for her tea. She blew it lightly and then sipped carefully. She didn't wait for them to ask more questions. "He was DoE, had been for a while. His research was everything the government wanted. Needed. You pick the word."

"Really?" Nancy said skeptically. "From what the kids told me, his project was based in make believe."

"For the naked eyes, perhaps, but you saw the monster from the cave, didn't you?" Moira asked. Both Nancy and Jonathan nodded. "I was the one who found it, *it woke me*. All I had to do was *touch* it."

Nancy felt a shiver up her spine and she dropped the pen. Under the table, Jonathan reached out and took her hand. Moira continued her tale.

"I don't know how he and Brennan got to me after I found the monster, but Terry was already there when they came, looking like a fucking fairy tale princess or something. She was so beautiful, so full of life…" she sighed putting her cup down. "She told me what happened to me, what it meant for my future, and before she could go into many details the DoE knocked at my family's door demanding to see the body."

"How did they know about the body? Did you tell the police?"

Moira shook her head no.

"I didn't even tell my sister," she said. "I was too scared, because I knew it wasn't human. It couldn't possibly be human, the man without a face from bedtime stories in Crown Point."

Nancy reached for her tea, feeling the warmth of the cup and deciding almost without thinking that it was in a temperature good enough and it didn't need any more cooling down. A year and a half in Maine did that to a person. She sipped, her eyes never leaving Moira, and that tea was *perfect*.

"The moment Heron entered the room, I saw the look on Terry's face. I knew everything had changed already, before even starting." As she spoke, Moira's expression went blank, as if she was living it all again. "I remember Terry getting up from the sofa and circling him. He wasn't even *pretty*, he was just this nerdy looking guy with brown, boring hair, but I guess I know what she saw in him – he was *vibrating* with energy, and not the way one might imagine."

Jonathan reached for the cream and poured some in his tea, adding a couple of spoons of sugar after. He stirred it, all the while hanging to her words, and Nancy could physically *feel* him sighing once he sipped his tea. If there was one person who knew how to appreciate food, it was Jon.

"She told him that there was something he *had* to see, grabbed his hand and dragged him to the cave, crossing the woods in our farm with such ease, I ran after them wondering how she knew where to go, those agents behind me. I got in the cave just in time to see her urging him to touch the monster. *You'll see*, she had said, *clear as day. You'll see everything*."

Moira sighed, her eyes focusing again. She sipped her tea one more time and Nancy reached for her fork, cutting a bite of pie to herself. That pie too tasted amazing.

"I asked a million times and Terry never confirmed, but I think she knew damn well that Nicholas wasn't a seer, that he was more than that. And as a reacher… he lost sign of the limits."

"He went too far," Jonathan concluded.

Somberly, Moira nodded.

"And by going too far, he pushed Brennan to new boundaries too. They didn't know where to stop, and when Terry warned him… it

was too late."

"Warned him about what?" asked Nancy. She quickly glanced at her plate and was shocked to see that half of her slice was already gone.

"About getting out of control," Moira answered. "You see, he loved Terry a real fucking lot, but he loved his work more. And Nicholas Heron's loyalty had never lain with the government, only with himself." She shook her head sadly and popped another bite of pie in her mouth, talking around it rather gracefully. "He turned his back on Terry and Brennan, following the line until he found the strongest point possible, all the way north in Indiana. The Hawkins axis, Terry liked to call it. It enhanced the supernatural just as fiercely. And then, the universes collided."

There was a collective gulp in the kitchen, even the music from the radio seemed to silence. Nancy wrote down another note, confirming another theory of hers – *Hawkins ley line has the power*.

"He opened a breech," Jonathan assumed correctly. "Just like Ellie."

"He did so because he wanted more," Moira said. "He wanted to be invincible, but when he came back… he was just mad."

Moira offered more pie and tea for everyone and the kids gladly accepted the slices. Nancy hadn't finished hers yet, managing to slow down, and Jonathan hadn't even begun eating, so he decided to give it a bite.

"This is so sweet and wonderful!" Jon exclaimed, mouth full, making Nancy smile lovingly. Moira beamed.

"You have to know that you won't find bitterness in the Nixe of the Night's home," she said solemnly and the kids chuckled.

"Is your family still in Crown Point?" Nancy asked, her fork scrapping her plate not willing to let any piece of that pie go to waste.

"My brother is taking care of the farm, but my sister and I left without looking back once MK Ultra was over," Moira said. "I couldn't stand staying in Indiana anymore, so I found a job in Washington, where I stayed for a couple of years and then moved here when K

was born, to help Layla."

"That's nice of you," Jon said swallowing the last bit of his pie. Moira promptly put another slice in his plate and in Nancy's, and served them more tea.

"I saw what happened to Terry," she said. "And I realized that family matters more than people give credit to it. I wanted to be around for Layla and her kids."

"Did you ever talk to Terry and Nicholas again?"

Moira shook his head no.

"He tried to reach out to me about three years ago, when he got strong enough to start recruiting, but I blocked him out."

"Three years ago? Recruiting?" Nancy said frowning, her fork all but forgotten and her pen back in hand. The woman raised an eyebrow.

"What, didn't you realize yet?" Moira asked. "I thought you knew all along."

"Knew what?"

Moira took a deep breath watching the two of them and then she turned to the kids.

"Why don't you take your plate and go back to that movie in the TV room?" she suggested, a hand on Jackie's bony shoulder and she waited for the kids to gather their things and head out before continue talking. "Look, Nicholas is one crazy motherfucker, but he's also the strongest person I've ever seen. He's got insane ideas that he's learned with time to put them in practice."

"Moira," Nancy cut her, willing the woman to get to the point already. The seer shot her a hard glare. "What's he recruiting?"

"Heads," she said. "He needs 8 heads, and he's the main one. Once the heads are all ready, he will be unstoppable."

Heads. Wasn't that how El put it? That Will and Barb were heads?

Except that Will didn't fully turn, like Barb and the others, and that was why they were calling on him.

"Will didn't turn," Jonathan said, once again reading Nancy's mind.

"I know," Moira said. "And as long as it stays that way, Heron will be incomplete, instable… mortal. Once you get rid of the Flayer, he'll be weak enough to be destroyed, head by head."

"But it keeps coming back," Jonathan said, a little desperate. "We don't have a way to suppress Will's change anymore, that thing..."

"Yes you do," Moira guaranteed. Upon their confused glares she sighed. "Medicine, kids. It's evolved enough to get Nicholas' magic out of his system like a cancer."

Well, couldn't she have said that first thing when they arrived?

"That's it?" Jonathan asked hopefully. Moira nodded and sipped her tea.

"As long as it's not too late," she said. Jonathan's mood fell as fast as it had risen.

"How would we ever know?" he asked.

Moira said nothing for a moment, looking sympathetically at them. She set her cup down and reached out for his hand once again, but this time she only patted it.

"You'll know."

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a/n: thank you for not forgetting about me! please, tell me what you thought of this chapter, and I'll see you soon :D

11. into the deep sea

Author's note: So... heh this one is on my beta's tab, you wanna know why? I had about half of the chapter written and overall I was kinda bored with nothing to watch. (not bored about the story, mind that) My beta and friend had been showcasing Fullmetal Alchemist in forever and I was like, you know what? Lemme try that.

Long story short, I understand now why people love FMA to pieces.

ANYWAY. This is the chapter everyone was waiting for. I hope you're pleased with it, because it also has the FIRST scene I've ever thought for this fic. This is the story: I was writing "1985" and back then I genuinely thought it would be my only ST fic. And then someone said "sequel!" and I was like, no? And then it came to me this one clear scene. It's in the second POV of this chapter and you'll get to it fairly fast. That was it, guys. That's how/why you ended up with a trilogy.

I hope you enjoy it.

My classes will be back next week, but the beginning of semester has its perks, so fingers crossed. We have one chapter and an epilogue to go, so bear with me.

Have a nice read, guys!

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10. into the deep sea

December, 1986

Will Byers

The lighter flicked once and only lit up on the second try, fighting against the chilly air under the bleachers of Hawkins High's multiuse field, and the sweetened smell of marijuana spread around Will when he took the first hit. After water, this was the best thing to calm the enraged roar in his head, and by far the handier.

There weren't baths in school. Weed would have to do.

Will checked his watch, his blunt on his lips, and calculated ten minutes until someone came after him. He sat on a piece of wood put there by some anonymous genius, crossed his legs and breathed out slowly after taking the joint between two fingers, contemplating that he should've known better that happiness was an ephemeral thing.

"I don't think that's legal, Byers," someone snickered and Will sighed. See the point?

"Do you have anything to do with this?" he replied calmly gesturing to himself. Troy stepped in front of him, keeping a safe distance and said nothing. "Yeah, I thought so."

"People can see you," he said and Will raised an eyebrow.

"Are you… *worried* about me? That's cute."

"Shut up," Troy replied, sounding more like the boy Will was used to since elementary school.

"Now, that's more like it," he joked. To his surprise, Troy smiled and then blushed. Will offered a smoke. "Want some?"

"Nah, I'm good."

Instead of leaving, Troy stood there as if he was on the lookout or something. Will didn't understand him. After those kisses last summer, most of the time Troy ignored his presence and Will couldn't say he was bothered about it. They had never, ever been on the same page anyway. But at this point he wondered what the hell they were. Frenemies, perhaps? Who could tell?

"I heard you've been deep in pussy," Troy finally said and Will smiled.

"Yeah, man, it's great."

Will couldn't help but notice the frown that grew on Troy's face, then.

"How do you do that? How can you navigate from one to another so easily?"

The questions sounded so much like thoughts out loud that for a

moment Will wasn't sure he was supposed to answer, but when Troy looked at him with a hint of desperation he shook his head. See? He called it ages ago. Really, very gay. Couldn't even pretend he liked girls without feeling disgusted.

"By swinging both sides," Will said with a shrug, even if it didn't sound very helpful. "But you're supposed to *like* both sides equally. And I really do."

"For real?" Troy sounded both parts impressed and disgusted; it made Will want to laugh. This was a real talk, though, so he kept it professional.

"Why the fuck would I settle for one when I could have pretty much everything?" he asked genuinely.

"Yeah, but… I don't know, girls…" Troy shivered. He literally shivered, and because of that Will laughed. His muscles reacted almost instantaneously with a pang on his stomach and Will swallowed down with skilled efficiency.

"Girls are *awesome*," he said, eyes shining. His mind travelled back to the previous night, when he didn't even go home and stayed at Ava's, since her parents weren't in town. Last night of being alright, it seemed. "No shit, they're just the best. But they're not your jam, dude. Stop beating yourself over it and just be you."

"Hah hah," Troy fake laughed. "So easy to say."

Will shrugged and took another hit, his carefully calculated joint almost over.

"Just consider it," he said. To be quite honest, there wasn't much Will could do, every person was a person with their own backstories and struggles. He didn't know shit about Troy's home and life, so what else could he say?

"Your friends must be looking for you," Troy changed the subject.

"Probably not," Will said taking one last hit. "El knows where I am."

Troy frowned at him.

"You're both freaks, you know?"

"I know," Will answered and looked up at him smiling. "And you're gay. The difference is, we own it."

That was low, he knew, but Will was bothered by this annoying pain on the bottom of his stomach and his head was throbbing, cutting short his willingness to chat. He got on his feet and passed by Troy without another word, too concentrated in walking straight, his breathing controlled to the maximum. He would not break today. Not after such a great weekend with his family buying Christmas stuff and decorating the house for the arrival of Jonathan that Friday.

The other boy just stood there with his jaw dropped, frozen in place for a moment before heading in the opposite direction. Out of sight, Will took a deep breath and his whole body contracted, sending him down to one knee.

"*Fuck*," he said under his breath.

Gathering all his energy, Will breathed in and out two, three times. Slowly. Carefully. Begging for strength. He got to his feet again and walked.

xxx

Elle Hopper

She was going to *ace* this Spanish test so easily, it was even shameful for the others in her class. That was what El kept thinking as she finished the first page of questions and turned the sheet to continue. Languages, the only thing she was good at in school. This class was her bitch. She was so good at it that it made other people mad.

El was so concentrated on her test, on doing it right and doing it perfectly that it took her a while to realize that something was off. She frowned, trying to listen, and the lights went down for a few seconds, engulfing the school in a collective "Uhhh" from the students.

Intrigued, El looked up at the ceiling right when the lights kicked back up again. Deep inside she knew she had to worry, but she was

almost done with this test and worry could wait; so she looked back down and read the next question, quickly marking the right answer. And then-

Her head snapped up, pencil dropping from her hand abruptly. Something *was* off. Something that *couldn't* wait. She felt the eyes on her – to her right, Dustin, to her left, Savannah – but that didn't stop her from getting up from her seat without a word, her body following her instincts. She got her test and left it on the teacher's desk, heading to the door right after, all her things left by her chair.

"Elle, where are you going?" the teacher said. "You don't have a pass."

She ignored her and continued through the door with steady feet. El rushed through the corridors, even though in her head everything was in slow motion, and turned a couple of corners until she got to the boys' locker room.

Without hesitating, El pushed the door open, passing by the rows of lockers and benches where boys in different levels of dressing acknowledged her with catcalls or shrieks that she ignored, all sounds muffled in her ears, until she got to the showers – that only five minutes ago would be blasting with noise and naked boys, but was now empty. Beyond the showers, there was the door she was looking for, with stalls and a mirror. The boys' gym toilet.

"Will?" El called getting in. There were a few guys there too, and they looked at her with this disgusted expression she wasn't sure was directed to her; she was right to consider it, because right there and then, she heard the sickening sound of heaving coming from the last stall. "Will?"

The boys passed by El, leaving her alone in the toilet with the sick person. Her steps slowed down significantly as she reached for the door, she heard the sound of someone falling on the floor. El knew what she would find, and she didn't want to see it. In her head, she repeated Nancy's words, "*We're either too late or just in time, there's no in between.*"

As the door opened, El faced the inevitable. Will was on the floor, his head on his arm, skin pale with a thick layer of sweat. He had taken

off his jacket and his hair was loose, covering his face, sticking with vomit. He was a mess and it made El swallow down sadly. She flushed the toilet and then hovered her hands up and down his body, looking for something within her reach that she could do.

The venom of the displacer worked quite fine, though not completely efficiently this time, and she could feel all the bits and pieces of the thessalmonster in Will's body like little cancer spots, just like Jon said Moira told him it'd be. That realization sparked a little hope in El's chest and she reached out for him kneeling down by Will's side.

Will was shivering, and he trembled under her touch as she pushed his dirty hair from his face. He looked weak, done fighting, but he would have to find the strength to fight for a little longer.

"Ellie," Will said, his voice awfully weak, eyes closed. "I didn't… want…"

"Shhhh," she cut him, trying to calm him down. She touched his shoulder and caressed his upper arm. "I'm here to help you. Do you think you can hold on a little longer?"

"They wanna help to," he said, voice quivering with each shiver. "But I don't wanna…"

"Ignore them," El said firmly. "Will, look at me. *Look at me*." She insisted until he opened his eyes and looked at her. His eyes were bloodshot and she knew why. "I'm here. Stay with me, okay? I got this, I promise."

"It's too strong," he said apologetically and she shook her head.

"Not against the both of us. Will," El said reaching out and turning his head to her delicately. She needed all her might not to tremble. "I've got you."

His cold hand reached out and held her wrist, lightly but decided, and El felt that hope burn timidly, though a little brighter. She let go of him, slowing down her breathing to concentrate as she hovered her hands a couple of inches above him, trying to find all the pieces. There were many, but she could do it.

"Can you sit up?" she asked and after a moment to process her request, Will let go of her and pushed his body up, leaning against the wall. It seemed to be taking all of his strength to do the simplest tasks. "Okay," El said. Will looked up at her. "I'm gonna start pushing and pulling. It might hurt."

Against all odds, Will smirked.

"What is a little p-" his smart-ass reply was interrupted by a loud gasp as El curled her fingers, making sure to clean his head first.

Despite herself, she felt a tear drop on her cheek as she faced the amount of pain he was in. She was just getting started, how was this going to work? Swallowing down her doubts and fears, El tried again. This time, Will let out a pained growl through clenched teeth. The lights flickered.

"I'm sorry," El mumbled, her eyes burning with tears. The bell rang, declaring the end of second period. "I have to do this, I'm sorry."

She found another one and pulled again.

xxx

Mike Wheeler

Mike peeked inside the class hoping to see El already in her seat as it had been for the past months, but she wasn't there and it made him frown. Her reports about her Spanish class were always hilarious and he looked forward to it, only because she just looked so happy talking about the things she liked. He turned around when someone tapped his shoulder.

"Hey, Mike," Dustin greeted fixing the strap of his backpack on his shoulder. "You seen El?"

Mike frowned.

"Didn't you just have class with her?" he replied and Dustin shrugged.

"She left in the middle of the test and didn't go back. She was acting weird."

"Are you surprised?" Lucas interfered appearing by their side with Lexi.

"Savannah gave me this," Lexi said raising El's heavy backpack with both hands and Mike took it from her. "Where would Ellie go?"

"I heard some guys commenting that she was in the boys' locker room," Lucas said, but before anyone could comment on that, the lights went out again, making them all look up.

"Creepy," Lexi shuddered. "Like that bizarre energy problem we had a few years back, remember?"

The three boys immediately looked at each other with wide eyes, some of them swallowed, some of them looked terrified. All of them said the exact same thing.

"Will."

They bolted to the boys' locker room, each step of theirs worth three of Lexi's, who had to jog behind them. They passed by Jennifer, who tried to get a word through them with little to no success and ended up joining Lexi in confusion. Mike didn't look back to see who was following him or not as he pushed the locker room's doors open. Place was mostly empty now, the only sound coming from the showers, but when they got there, the sound was just an echo from the toilets.

"El?" Mike called going through the door to the toilets. He could see their feet from one of the open stalls.

The sound amplified greatly, a mix of pleas and cries that echoed in the room. They all stopped abruptly, the lights flickered inconclusively above them. El's voice was made clear by the acoustics of the room and sent shivers through them.

"*I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, just stay with me, please… Will!*"

Mike got moving. He reached out and opened the door of the last stall, putting to work all his self-control not to retch under the smell of vomit and blood. Will had his back against the wall but his head was hanging low, a mix of blood and goo dripping from the corner of

his mouth. He looked like shit, and that was an understatement. Kneeling in front of him was El, both hands on his cheeks, trying to keep him awake, it seemed. She looked back at them and her face was covered with tears.

"Will!" Lexi exclaimed trying to break through the line of boys in front of her, but Lucas held her still.

"He's too weak," El said, her voice small and terrified. Mike's heart sunk. He had only heard her so helpless once, and it had been in school too, just the one across the street. "Without his help, I don't know what to do."

Will gagged and blindly pushed El's hand away. He turned to his side coughing, his hair covered his face, so they only saw the blood covered slug dropping on the floor. The sound was disgusting, as Jennifer's shocked "*what the fuck!*" hinted. Will reached for the slug as if to crush it, but El beat him to it, the little explosion of the animal left goo on the both of them.

Without warning, Will turned to El so fast, his hand gripping her throat, and she gasped holding his arm, eyes wide. She gestured for Mike to stop when he stepped towards them, and then she reached out trying to push Will's hair out of the way.

"Will," El said weakly. His gaze on her was empty and she gasped again as his grip tightened.

Mike didn't know what to do about that unhuman version of his friend and from the glance he gave his other friends they were in equal loss of action. El touched Will's face with trembling fingers.

"Brother, *please*."

Suddenly, Will released her and his head fell forward. El let out a sob, begging for forgiveness, and that was Mike's cue to get close and kneel down by her side, hold her. He didn't care that she was dirty; he just wanted to make sure that she was fine.

"What happened?" Mike demanded. "El, what's going on?"

El looked up at him; her tears were washing away the goo on her

cheek, but the front of her clothes weren't looking good.

"I pulled his strings," she said apologetically. Mike needed a few seconds to remember when he'd heard that before, and it had been not so long ago, when the Ps pranked her. "Mike," El cried leaning against him. "We're losing him. How am I going to be able to help him?"

He didn't know; he had no clue. But Mike knew looking in her eyes that she wasn't giving up, she just needed guidance.

"Water," Dustin said, a voice different from El and Will's that caught their attention. Mike looked up at him thinking fast and then nodded.

"Right, it might help," he said quickly, turning to El. "Water always enhanced your powers, and Barb called him Mind Flayer. That's a water-based creature."

"Mike, we don't have the time to prepare a bath," Lucas reasoned, but Mike was already shaking his head before the sentence was over.

"They don't need it anymore, right El? Didn't you use the lake at camp? That's fresh water. And Will, he keeps a bucket of water by his bed." Mike got up, bringing El to her feet with him. He was in full boss mode now. "Let's get him to the showers and then you can try again."

El nodded still starring up at him, and then Mike reached out to Will, pulling him up with difficulty. Lucas let go of Lexi and helped him out, they carried him to the other room, and then laid Will on the wet floor under the showers. Dustin came after then, turning every shower on, the water quickly started to pool and El rushed to Will's side, her hands hovered above his chest, trembling. It was getting really cold with the heating system struggling to kick back up with the generator.

"Babe," Mike called. El looked up at him. "You've got this."

Mike stopped breathing as he watched her touch Will's chest lightly; her hands went up to his neck and he saw her fingers touch the water. El leaned over, almost leaning her forehead on his chest, and

then she called upon him ever so gently they almost didn't hear her because of the roar of the showers. The spray of cold water didn't make it through their heavy jackets, but neither Will nor El had coats on, her washed jeans were soaked already.

They all jumped when Will gasped for air, and El sat up just in time to hold the hand he had stretched in her direction.

"Ellie," Will said, and she held him tighter.

"I'm here," El said. "Are you with me?"

Will nodded.

"Get it out," he pleaded.

"Don't fight me," she said firmly.

Her right hand was holding Will's, but with her left hand she rubbed the skin of his arm all the way to his shoulder. Mike could swear he saw something, even if it was very small, crawling under Will's skin. Through gritted teeth, Will protested, but El was holding him firmly.

"What the fuck is going on?" Lexi asked. Mike had forgotten that she was even there and when he turned to look at her, he also saw Dustin talking to Jennifer in the corner of the room. Will grunted again.

"Stop fighting *me* and start fighting *it*," El said firmly. She let go of his hand and slapped him. "William! Get it together. Now."

"El," Mike called.

"Shut up."

He did. And waited. Her left hand still worked on Will's arm, the right hand seemed to be working on his right side. Mike started to observe Will then, seeing that he was still pale and still looked inhuman, but the fire in his eyes was the same fire he had seen a couple of years ago, when Will pushed Max out of the way to get the full blow of a Displacer on his chest. Determination like nothing in this world nor the next.

A huge spasm came over Will and he leaned to the side coughing. El looked around quickly and the nearest trash can flew in their direction just in time for Will to vomit inside it.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" Lexi exclaimed. "What- How-"

El looked at Mike and he knew, he just knew exactly what she needed him to do. He turned to the others.

"Okay, this is what we're going to do. Jennifer, Lexi, you go call Hopper. Not Joyce, not 911, Hopper," he instructed. "Tell him it's happening and he has to come immediately, he'll know what we mean. If you can stay and wait for him outside it'll be even better, but Dustin will be at the door to make sure only you can enter here. Lucas, get your car keys ready, we might need to get out of here through the back. Everyone. Go."

And just like that, they did. Of course they seemed worried and reluctant, but they trusted his instructions, even the girls who weren't quite used to that side of him. As soon as they were out of the shower room, Lucas offered him a folding chair and they both sat near El and Will, watching them work.

"Whatever help you need," Lucas said when El looked at him. "Just name it."

She nodded. Her hair was completely wet and there were bags under her eyes, the only evidence of her draining powers. She still looked strong enough yet, so that was good. With no time to waste, she kept working.

The minutes ticked slowly as they watched El push and pull the insides of Will, doing whatever it was she could do to rid him of the thessal. Mike didn't know exactly what she was doing, but he trusted her more than he trusted anyone in his life. Every now and then, he and Lucas exchanged a look, checked their watches worriedly. Mike had delivered the orders so firmly, but as a matter of fact everything was a blur.

He supposed he could only figure out a step at a time. For such a planner as he was, that was a bit unsettling, but Mike was no psychic,

he didn't know what the future held. All he could do is work with now. And now, his best friend was coughing blood on the cold wet floor of a boys' shower room.

They didn't know if Will would survive.

Hell, they might as well be late.

"El?" Lucas called snapping Mike out of his thoughts and his eyes went from Will to her. "How are you holding up?"

"Barely," she replied. Her voice was weak, making Mike's heart sink.

She had her back to him, so he didn't know what she looked like, but he supposed not very well, from Lucas' expression. Mike looked at his watch again, and for a change he processed the time – thirteen minutes had passed, which wasn't much, but felt like forever. Will looked so weak and pale, it scared Mike. Things weren't looking up, it seemed.

"I can't push it all out," El said. Her hands still hovered above her brother, fingers curling whenever she'd find something. Mike didn't know how many times she had done it already, checking Will up and down like that. "It's a lot, he needs surgery."

"What can you do?" Mike asked getting up to face her and his breath caught when he saw her. El was very drained, purple veins visible all over her face, eyes bloodshot. He kneeled in front of her, his knee in the water. "Babe, what can you still do?"

El shivered, her whole body trembled. It occurred to him that both siblings could suffer from a severe case of hypothermia if they didn't get what they needed from that water soon. With difficulty, she opened her mouth to speak, but then someone banged at the door loudly, making it to the showers with thunderous strength. Hopper.

"Daddy," El called. Mike jumped out of the way to give Hopper all the space he needed.

The Chief took Mike's previous spot, but his attention was all on Will, who seemed to be only partially conscious.

"It's in his stomach, I think I got it all there," El was saying as Hopper tried to shake Will awake.

"What's with the water?" he asked.

"It's to help," Mike said standing behind El. "It enhances their powers."

Hopper frowned at him.

"Well, there won't be nothing to be enhanced if *they are cold dead*!" he replied, his voice rising emphatically at each word.

The man reached for his radio, calling upon a bunch of code words with quick efficiency. He asked El a couple of times if she had reached her limit, and even though she said no, he stopped her when she reached for Will again.

"You did what you could, baby, I'll take it from here," he said the second time with a reassuring pat on her shoulder.

"But Dad," El protested.

"Baby girl, try and get up," he said. "I need you to do something."

After a moment of hesitation, El struggled to get on her feet. She easily lost balance and the only thing that kept her from falling face first was Mike's arms grabbing her by the waist, putting her back against his chest. She was light and struggling to get on her feet, but she didn't have the strength. Damn, Mike was surprised she lasted that long, considering all the power she had to use. He didn't even know how long she had been with Will before they got there.

"Here's what I want you to do," Hopper said. Mike didn't know when he proceeded to lift Will's upper body, keeping him in a seated position against him. "I want you to go with Mike and Lucas to the Wheelers'. Their house is warm, Karen will be willing to help and Joyce will meet you there. You stay there and rest for a few hours and I'll let you know if we have any progress. I don't want you to use your powers anymore today, understood?"

"Dad…" El started to protest, but to talk seemed to be catalyzing her

weakness, for her knees buckled. Mike picked her up and looked at Hopper.

"Can you do that?" the Chief asked, but this time he was talking directly to Mike.

"Yes, sir," he said firmly.

Mike heard the sound of keys and he looked at Lucas, who was twirling it on his fingers. Only then he realized that everyone was there again, even Lexi and Jennifer, both of whom still looking confused. They didn't have time for explanations now, but he guessed they owed them one soon.

"Guess we better get going," Lucas said and Mike nodded.

"I'll help with the bags," Jennifer volunteered.

"I'll get some towels!" Lexi said, rushing back to the locker room.

"You stay here with me, Dustin," Hopper said. "And we'll get our story straight before the rest of the convoy comes."

They quickly agreed to everything and got going. To leave through the back, Mike had to carry a dripping, barely conscious El through the gym and out on the field. The cold and snow hit them in the face and he needed all his focus to not shiver and drop her. Mike still had his jacket on, but El was dripping wet and soaking through his clothes quickly. Besides, her lips were starting to get blue.

Lexi caught up with them when they were almost in Lucas's car, apologizing because it took her a while to find clean towels. There had been a gym class in second period, which granted almost every towel unusable. The four of them gingerly helped El in the backseat, Mike climbed in with her and Lucas took his driver spot, kicking the heating system up as soon as the engine was on.

"No, you stay," Lucas said when Lexi mentioned to take the passenger seat.

"But you need help," she said. The two boys shook their heads.

"We've got this one," he said pointing at El with his thumb and Mike nodded. He was holding her close, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. "You go on and stay with Will, okay?"

"Lucas," Lexi protested, down to stomping her foot.

"Hey," Lucas said looking right into her eyes. His expression softened all of a sudden. "Maria, *mi amor*. Remember when you asked to not be left out and I said you were part of the team? It was a bit of a lie, wasn't it?" Lexi nodded. "Not anymore. I promise."

"Okay," she said reluctantly and stepped back, closing the door in the process. Lucas backed the car and sped out of the parking lot.

"That was surprisingly easy," Mike commented.

"Yeah," Lucas looked at them through the rearview mirror. "I'm telling her everything though, later. She deserves to know."

Mike didn't say anything right away, his eyes on the line of ambulances and police cars that were heading to the school noisily, making El cringe. He held her closer, feeling the heating of the car crash against the coldness of the water in their clothes. At least his house wasn't far.

"I know."

Lucas made it to Mike's house in record time. They seriously didn't even have the time to process what had just happened in school before the car stopped in front of the garage and they had to carry El inside. Mike was the one doing the actual carrying, while Lucas brought in all their bags and jackets; El was still trembling, still freezing cold, and as soon as Karen saw what the commotion in her front door was about, she rushed to their aid.

"What's happening?" she exclaimed shocked, her hands quickly checking temperatures and heartbeats. Mike fixed El's weight in his arms.

"Mom, remember three years ago, when Will disappeared and came back, and you had to get me and Nancy at school?" Karen nodded. "This is more or less like that."

She looked at El again. Mike didn't really know how much his mother understood about what happened before, he only knew that she had formed a "parents group" alongside with Joyce and Hopper, but if the Chief said that he could come to her for help, then he trusted her.

"She's freezing, let's get her in a bath," she instructed, not missing a heartbeat. El shook her head.

"No baths," she mumbled. "Too tempting."

Oh, yeah, she needed to recover. Mike thought fast.

"Mom, do we still have those water bags?" he asked. Karen nodded. "Heat those, instead. I'm gonna get her to my room."

"And I'm going to head back to school," Lucas said before Karen could protest. "Maybe classes will be suspended. I will keep you posted."

Mike nodded and headed to the stairs, his arms were beginning to hurt from all that carrying around. Gladly, his room was as warm as the rest of the house, and he sat El on his chair. He quickly searched his drawers for the warmest clothes for her and for him, got a fluffy towel and put everything on the desk in front of her.

"I'm gonna change and I'm gonna get my mom's hairdryer, okay?" Mike said. "Here's a towel for you to dry off."

El didn't respond, her eyes blindly fixed somewhere past him, so he took it as a yes and left the room. He changed in the common bathroom quickly, found the hairdryer and when he went back to his room, El was in the exact same position, shivering a little more than before. She would never get warm with those clothes.

"El," he called and she looked at him weakly.

He understood, then. He had to help her. So Mike closed the door, left the hairdryer on the desk and resumed the space between them.

"Let's get you out of these clothes first," he said softly. El nodded and he reached for her long-sleeved shirt.

She didn't protest once as he removed that shirt, nor the top under it,

not even when he helped her out of her training bra. She didn't cover herself, and he did everything for her, putting the towel around her shoulders and rubbing her skin over the soft fabric. Her hair still dripped, so he found another towel to wrap around her head.

"Here, what about this one?" Mike suggested taking a long-sleeved shirt he had put on the desk and showing to her. El moved her head, but he wasn't sure if she meant to say something with that.

He passed the shirt through her head and the towel fell behind her as she put on one sleeve and then the other. Mike was going about it clinically and focused, and though he could see her, he wasn't even processing the view of her. It was like changing a sleepy Holly, he thought at some point and went with it.

After helping El in a sweatshirt, he put mittens on her hands, and then he helped her take off her boots and socks before getting her to her feet. Mike's shirt was large enough to go almost to the middle of her thighs, and that had been the reason he chose it. He unbuttoned her jeans and she held on to him for support as it dropped heavily on the floor, her panties along with it. He reached for the towel again and kneeled in front of her, drying off her legs, helping her put on sweatpants and then the wool socks.

With El sitting again on the chair, Mike got to work on her hair. He got one of Holly's hairbrushes, plugged the hairdryer and let the hot air caress her as he brushed her hair. That was when his mom knocked at the door.

"I brought the bags," she said putting down a market bag. She had a small bowl with a spoon in it on her other hand. "And some soup. You look like you can have your energy restored."

"Thanks," El said, her voice barely audible over the roar of the hairdryer.

Karen put the soup on the desk and then looked at Mike.

"Can you put the bags on the bed, mom?" he requested. "Under the comforter. She needs to rest and get warm at the same time."

"Of course," she said and got to it right away. "I talked to Joyce, she'll be here any moment."

El removed the mittens and pulled the bowl of soup in her direction, which was a good sign. If she was feeling well enough to try and eat, she was probably finally warming up. Her hair was mostly dry now, one of the pay offs for keeping it short, so Mike left it be and helped her eat instead.

"Put them back on," he said taking the spoon from her hand and pointed at the mittens. "Lemme do this."

El let him. He kneeled in front of her and helped her eat, like she had been letting him do everything else, and he took pleasure in those moments with just the two of them, even if it was coming from a shitty situation. She ate almost everything, and when she was satisfied, Mike helped her to the bed, tucking her in nicely.

"You rest, alright? I'll be right back."

El fell asleep almost immediately and Mike left the room, keeping the door open. There was a phone call he had to make, even though he didn't *want* to, and his mom probably wanted to grill him for some answers too, so he went downstairs.

The house smelled of ham, spices and honey, and he opted to use the kitchen phone, because it was where his mother was and it'd save him the trouble. With displeasure, he dialed the number of the office and requested to be transferred to his dad's office. At least calling in the morning meant that he didn't have to talk with Spencer, another thing he was avoiding.

Mike was well aware that he couldn't avoid Spencer forever, but he could afford to stay clear of the subject for today – it was a hell of a busy day after all, and he had a bunch of excuses to use. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Tomorrow, he thought firmly. Tomorrow he would sit with Penny and end things once and for all. It was bound to happen for the past few weeks anyway, he was sure she noticed and he was sure she'd understand.

"*Teddy Wheeler speaking*," his father said on the other side of the call and Mike flinched. What was that thing about pulling the Band-Aid off in one go?

"Hi, Dad," Mike replied with a sigh.

"*Mike? Is everything all right?*" Teddy asked and Mike looked up at his mother. He wasn't sure his father's worry should be so surprising, but it was.

"Yeah, I mean, sort of," he answered nervously playing with the phone cord. "Look, I'm just calling to tell you that I won't go to work today. As a matter of fact, I don't think I'll keep working with you."

"*What?*" Teddy said. "*Why not?*"

"The short answer is – 'cause I don't wanna. Never did. But I can give you the long answer when you get home, *if* you want to talk." Which Teddy never did, but it was worth the shot. From the sink, his mother watched him.

"*Can you at least tell me why you're not coming today?*"

Mike took a deep breath, considering what to say and opted to be vague.

"Some stuff came up and I got my hands full. You'll probably hear about it soon."

"*Mike-*" his father started, but his attention was on the doorbell that just rang. Karen passed behind him drying her hands on her apron.

"It must be Joyce, I'll go get it."

"Okay, mom."

"*Michael,*" Teddy tried again. Mike's eyes were on the calendar on the wall already thinking of the next call he had to make. It was the 18th, a Thursday. Nancy wouldn't be at the dorms now.

"We'll talk later, right dad?" Mike cut, unwilling to extend that call for longer than necessary.

"*Sure, son,*" Teddy said with a sigh and Mike wasted no time, hanging up after saying bye. He knew the dorms' number by heart now and decided to take a shot. At least he could leave a message.

After leaving a quick message for Nancy, Mike followed the voices and found Joyce with his mother in the living room, Karen trying to calm down an antsy Mrs. Murphy who was bouncing Callie nervously. Joyce wasn't nearly as hysterical as she had been three years ago, but she was clearly shaken by Will's situation.

"Mike, dear," she said as soon as she saw him. "Where's Ellie?"

"Sleeping it off," he said and waited knowing exactly what she would ask after.

"You were with Will, weren't you? You saw him. How was he?"

That was a tricky question, but for the past couple of weeks Mike had been mastering sounding convincing while delivering vague answers. Of course it would be tricky to be vague with a Mama Bear, but it was worth a shot.

"Fighting," he said. "El did everything she could and she was confident it would work and Hop is with him, so I guess he'll be fine."

Joyce eyed him suspiciously for a moment and he held her stare to make sure that she would be convinced. After a moment, she sighed, her shoulders dropping in defeat. Mike looked over at his mother, who had her eyes on him and a frown. He just shrugged lightly and her eyes turned to Joyce.

"I'm finishing preparing lunch, Jo," Karen said softly. "Would you mind helping out? Could be a good distraction."

"I don't know…" Joyce said insecure. "I'm not a very good cook."

"Nonsense, come on," Karen got up offering Joyce a reassuring smile. "It's a *distraction*, and you need it."

"But Callie…"

"I can watch her for you," Mike offered right away. "She's such a

sweet baby and I don't mind."

"Really, Mike?" Joyce asked with a relieved and sad smile. "You don't need to."

"I know I don't, but I don't mind. It's okay, I like babies." He reached out and delicately took Callie in his arms. She went with him without complaints, the sweetest baby since his own baby sister, and even offered him a toothy smile. Mike looked around and found Callie's bag on the sofa, so he took it. "I'll be upstairs watching over her and El."

Without giving them a moment to protest, Mike went back upstairs and to his room, keeping the door ajar for the moment. He left Callie's bag on the desk, put his chair near the bed and sat down, feet on the bed as he cradled the baby. El was fast asleep, all warm under the comforters. She still looked a little pale, but at least she was resting.

"You want to hear a story, Callie?" he said to the baby, for she was looking up at him with big blue eyes. Mike looked around. "I don't have anything… of Holly's here… hold on."

He reached out to the drawer of his desk and awkwardly fumbled until he found his notepad. It was a new one, where he wrote down his story ideas in a much ordered way, unlike the one El had used a while ago. Mike flipped the pages, trying to see if there was something there that would catch the attention of a six month old baby and stopped when Callie put her chubby little hands on a page.

"You like the dragon?" Mike asked. "I'm not as good an artist as your big brother, but I think it turned out alright, don't you agree?"

Callie's taps on the notebook were taken as a yes, so Mike decided to keep the page open. He quickly read through what was written and decided that it was good enough to read for the baby, so he sat Callie with her back to his chest and started the tale.

"*In a different world, some would say that the Copper Dragon's tower was actually a suburban house in a small city laid on top of a Ley Line, but that was Cradle Bridge and Ley Lines were actually called Fairy Tracks*

there. Copper's tower had been forged on stone and sand with an iridescent glass ceiling and it was the safest place to be in Cradle.

The Copper Dragon was very wise and docile, and it had plenty of friends in Cradle Bridge who always came to visit, for the tower was a source of power under Copper's care and it couldn't be left alone. Its favorite friend, however, was an incredibly Brave Princess from the other side of the Track – a blue-eyed girl with a sharp shot called Nana, daughter of the Queen of Spades – whose top pastime was to make sure that her mother's kingdom was safe from the Unseelie King and his crazed pixies.

Nana, the Brave Princess, loved Copper very dearly; when time was abundant, (and sometimes even when it wasn't), she'd make sure to come by her friend's place for them to catch up and share their knowledge, what they liked to do the most was to have fun. Some said that the most precious bond in the whole Cradle Bridge was that of the Brave Princess with the Copper Dragon, capable of moving mountains and breaking the barriers of space.

Things started to change when Prince Swing of the Unseelie Court struck a match with the Brave Princess, falling head over heels for her in the process. He wondered if there was someone as beautiful and intelligent as Nana, and failed to see that there was more to her – that she was a we, surrounded by those who needed her guidance.

Copper worried about Nana, but not out of jealousy like some would like to think. It worried out of fear. Nana was his very best friend, and unseelie love was as intense as it was unforgiving. The Brave Princess was smart, but young in years, and out of its eternal aura Copper could see that Swing was beyond his years.

Prince Swing was dangerous; he was Unseelie, after all, but what not many seemed to know was that he was also very naïve. Blinded by his infatuation, Nana became his whole world and that was all it took for Copper to be left outside."

Mike looked down at Callie, for he finished the page and would have to turn it, covering the drawing of the dragon that she had liked. She had slipped to the side and was heavily leaning on his right arm now, two fingers in her mouth as she looked at him still awake, but just barely, so he decided to change methods.

"Story would start to get depressing soon anyway, and you don't want to listen to that, right, Calista?" he humored.

Leaving his notebook on the top of his desk, Mike got Callie and went to Holly's room. He got her dolls' stroller and put some blankets on top of it, and then he pushed the little stroller back to his room, all with just one hand because he was skilled that way. Perks of helping out taking care of his own little sister for almost seven years now.

He put Callie on the bed between El and the wall and then set to improvise a bed on the floor with as many pillows, sheets, blankets and comforters he could find. When he was satisfied with the result, he got Callie again and put her half sitting against a pillow and covered her with her own baby blankets.

Only after he made sure that she was all warm and cozy that Mike got his guitar from the hang on the wall and joined her on the floor softly playing a few notes. Callie's eyes turned to him interested and he smiled, quickly deciding what to play – an acoustic, laid low version of "Isn't She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder.

The baby seemed to enjoy it quite a lot, so he kept playing every song that came to his mind that he knew how to play, going as far as Luther Vandross, Grandmaster Flash, Blondie, and Judas Priest. By the time he went back to Stevie Wonder, this time with "Stranger on the Shore of Love," Callie was as fast asleep as her big sister.

All that playing had put him in the mood, though, so instead of stopping all together, Mike got back to the chair and continued playing, now a Scorpions song he had been trying to avoid thinking about, but that had gotten under his skin for the past month or so. With his feet on the bed for support, Mike played the intrinsic chords of the song, humming along instead of singing the lyrics, but when he got to the chorus it was inevitable.

"*If we go again all the way from the start I would try to change the things that killed our love,*" he sang, changing the lyrics where it suited better. "*My pride has built a wall, so strong that you can't get through. Is there really no chance to start once again? I'm loving you…*"

Mike played without thinking. He had been practicing that song

almost daily, more than he'd been writing or sparing time for Spencer, which made him a hell of a shitty person – not that he found it was some news, Mike always considered him a bit of a fraud. And he kept on singing, even if very low in order not to wake up the girls and even if he couldn't match Klaus Meine's electric tone.

"*If we'd go again, all the way from the start I would try to change the things that killed our love. Yes, I've hurt your pride, and I know what you've been through. You should give me a chance, this can't be the end… I'm still loving you…*"

"Mike?" a small voice followed by a timid knock on the door interrupted him and he turned around to see Holly standing there with a plate in her hand. "Lunch is ready, I bought some for Ellie."

He nodded and got up, hanging his guitar on the wall again. Holly got in the room carefully and he sat by the bed shaking El a little to wake her up.

"Who brought you home, Fozzie?" he asked.

"Dad," she said. "But he didn't stay."

Nodding, Mike turned his attention to El again and pushed the hair from her face, trying to wake her without fussing too much.

"El," he called when she stirred. "Babe, get up and eat a little."

She cracked an eye open and then yawned, looking at him with sleepy eyes.

"Your bed is really warm," she mumbled and Mike smiled.

"It's the hot bags. Here, sit up."

Mike helped El sit and she leaned against the board, rubbed her eyes lazily. She looked so much better now than a couple of hours ago; he was relieved. Holly stepped closer and offered her the plate of food, and El gladly took it.

"Hello, Hol," she greeted.

"Hi," Holly replied. "Are you okay, Ellie?"

El nodded, offering her a reassuring smile.

"I'm just a little drained, that's all," she said getting the fork and cutting at her ham. The delicious smell of food made Mike's stomach growl, and El looked up at him. "Mike, did you eat?"

"Not yet," he said dismissively with a shrug. "I'm good."

"No, you're not," she deadpanned. Mike opened his mouth to protest, but Holly was faster.

"I already ate," his little sister said. "I can stay with them while you eat, Mike, it's okay."

He looked from Holly to El considering the possibility. Holly stared at him expectantly, eager to help and El just smiled with her eyes as she ate her food. Sighing, Mike finally agreed.

"Okay, fine," he decided getting up. "Make sure she eats well, Fozzie, I'll be back as soon as possible."

And he would, it was his intention, but Mike saw himself being forced to give a detailed report of what had happened in school that morning to Joyce. Apparently, Hopper had called and told them that Will had to be taken to Indianapolis for exams and to have an emergency surgery to remove a mass in his stomach.

By the time he went back upstairs, more than an hour had passed. He was taking some freshly baked cookies to El and Holly, but only found his little sister sitting by his desk with his notebook open.

"Where's El?" Mike asked immediately, but Holly was focused on something else.

"What happens with Copper next? Is it alright? Why would it follow the pixie?" she poured out questions and he even stepped back surprised by her indignation. "Mike, *where's the rest of the story*?"

"It's not complete yet," he answered. "Copper didn't go willingly, it was tricked. Look, why are you even *reading* it?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she replied in a heartbeat, dropping the notebook on the table. "The stories you write are so cool."

Mike sighed and then smiled.

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's all I really need, the approval of a six year old girl. I think my future looks promising."

"Don't be silly," Holly said laughing. "You're gonna need more than that."

"I don't know, Hol," Mike said shrugging. "I think you should consider working for a publishing house."

At first, Holly looked up at him with an "I know you're joking" face, but then she thought about it. She leaned against the back of the chair, put a hand on her chin pensively and hummed.

"Holly, where's El?"

"Oh, yeah, she's taking a shower, said she was all 'gory'. I don't know what it means. Is that for me?"

"Yeah, take some," he said pushing the plate of cookies in her direction. She picked a couple of cookies and hopped out of the chair.

"Thanks, Mikey. Now finish the story!" she said dramatically, pointing at the desk and making Mike laugh.

Holly passed by him and left the room, heading to the stairs and he watched her small frame go out of sight. Holly was a funny little girl, but she mentioned something important; El really was a little gory, she didn't clean up before going to bed. Mike looked over at the dark sheets of his bed then, and got closer to see how bad it was. Not very, apparently, but the pillowcase had a few stains.

In reality, most of the slimy thing that El got in contact with was on her clothes, and those were already in the washing machine along

with the towels in the basement, so Mike only occupied in changing the pillowcases. He also got the water bags from under the comforter, since they were barely warm anymore and left them on the desk, next to the empty plates.

Absently, Mike ate a cookie as he organized quickly all the mess on top of his desk and he looked down to see that Callie was still asleep, probably dreaming, because she was moving her arms and making baby noises, her rosy cheeks standing out now that her eyes were closed. He got the notebook on top of the pile making a mental note to keep writing the story as soon as he had the time. It was supposed to be a new campaign, but the writing style was very different from D&D and the story was gaining its own life, so he decided to write it as a standalone.

The door opened to let someone in, so Mike put the notebook back down and looked up, finding El standing there, one of Nancy's pink towels around her body, a hand on the door while the other held the clothes she had borrowed. Part of him processed that she could very well had changed in the bathroom, but he shushed that part and pushed it out the window.

"Mike," El said low looking up at him. Her hair was mostly dry, she didn't wash it, the tips sticking to her wet shoulders.

"Hey," he replied stupidly and flinched with his own idiocy. Her eyes didn't leave his, however, and when she spoke again, she did so with certainty.

"You've been calling me 'babe' again," she said and he nodded.

El stepped inside the room and closed the door. She left the clothes on the chair and got closer to him until they were practically chest to chest and he had to look down at her. Mike thought he heard the lock closing, but he couldn't say for sure, nor check, because all of a sudden – and he couldn't tell who initiated it, not even if one tried to drag the memory from his brain – they were kissing. Her hands went to the back of his neck and his arms were around her waist, one leaning against the other eagerly, thirsty.

They were separated for almost six months and one of the things

Mike missed the most was her kisses. El bit on his lower lip and his hands slipped to her ass and thighs; with a calculated jump, she had her legs around his waist and he was carrying her awkwardly to the bed, but without breaking the kiss.

The towel came loose, trapped between them, but they made no move to toss it aside as they toppled on the bed. El broke the kiss just for enough time to pull Mike's sweatshirt and shirt off, discarding them behind her.

As soon as the clothing was off, they went back to kissing, now a little more desperately. On top of her, Mike dared to let his hands wander on her waist and breasts.

It wasn't the first time, though. For his birthday the previous year, under the careless advice of Lexi Solaris and in the middle of a heated make out session, El had decided that it would be a good gift for him, second base. If Mike started to think hard about that day, he'd realize that it was there that he started to worry too much and question her feelings, but if he started to think hard about that day, he would get paranoid and that was the last thing he wanted to feel at the moment.

What he wanted was right there in his bed with him in that terrible, *terrible* timing – but he wouldn't focus on the timing either. Hell, he wasn't even going to focus on the sex, all that mattered was that it was El who was with him after months of excruciating longing for her touch.

Mike started to kiss down her neck and collarbone, slowly sliding off the bed. The drawer of his nightstand opened and for a split second he wondered how she knew, but he quickly brushed it off and got the little box, tearing it open. According to Nancy, the box was a gift from Steve and the wrap came with a subtle note that said something to the likes of "*Now that you're not dating the Chief's daughter anymore you can have some fun*." Of course, Mike had gone fifty shades of red when he tore the wrapping and found the box of condoms, but now he was glad to have it.

As he carefully unwrapped the square pack, El sat up and got him by the waistband of his sweatpants and started kissing his stomach and

chest. The pants were doing a very poor job at hiding Mike's excitement and her touch as she pushed them down also didn't help. A shiver went up Mike's spine and he leaned over to kiss her, his hand on her hair tilting her head back and El sighed, warming him from head to toe just like that.

They broke the kiss and El tossed the towel aside, matching his nakedness. For a moment, they just looked at one another, their breaths catching and cheeks blushing, but then, with a fine resolve, El went more to the middle of the bed making space for him and tapped the mattress by her side.

Without thinking twice, Mike quickly put the condom on and joined her. They laid side by side under the comforter looking at each other. El reached out and pushed his hair back, touched his cheekbone with delicacy and then rested two fingers against his lips trembling a little. He wanted to tell her so many things, apologize a million times, but when he opened his mouth to speak, she shushed him ever so gently and leaned closer, kissed him tenderly.

"I love you, Mike Wheeler," El said looking him in the eyes.

He knew that. He's known all along, but he had been too fucking ridiculous to accept her love before. Well, not now, not anymore. Mike had learned his lesson the hard way and it was about time he seek some redemption.

"I love you, Elle Hopper," Mike said, making sure to use the name she chose for herself almost two years ago.

El smiled, her fingers snaked through his hair on the back of his neck and she said the most El thing she could say there before he attacked her lips in a hungry kiss-

"I know."

It didn't last long, in twenty minutes Mike already was laying on his back staring at the ceiling, El nicely nested on his chest. They were both sweaty and satisfied, even though the whole thing had been a little awkward and bumpy. Mike's fingers played with El's hair lazily and she sighed content, kissed his neck. Now he definitely would

have to break things up with Spencer tomorrow, that was his priority.

They heard a little cry and El sat up quickly, stretching to check on her sister. She pushed the comforter aside and jumped over him to sit on the edge of the bed.

"She's hungry," she said and fished his sweatshirt from the floor to put it on before doing the same with the sweatpants. "I'm going to take her to my mom. You coming?"

Mike nodded.

"In a bit. You go ahead and I'll be right there."

El offered him one of her more sincere smiles and then leaned over to kiss him ever so lovely. It would've escalated if Callie didn't protest again, making El rush to her side.

"Oh, no! Don't cry, sweet baby, let's go find Mom," she said picking Callie up, blanket and all. She turned to Mike bouncing her baby sister as she spoke. "Maybe they have news on Will by now."

And by 'maybe' she probably meant 'certainly', because El knew it all, that was just how she was. Mike just nodded and watched her go with a smile on her face. He fought the urge to high-five himself once she closed the door and stretched instead, shooing away the exhaustion that suddenly hit him.

After quickly putting on some clothes, Mike got Callie's bag and went downstairs at the exact moment Lucas, Dustin and the girls arrived and in the middle of his mother's report on Hopper's last call.

"Rewind, please?" Mike asked. The newcomers stood by his side with snow dust on their shoulders, Jennifer snuggled with Dustin. "I didn't catch the beginning."

"Will is already in surgery," Karen said and El looked back at him, so he stepped closer to her. "The exam that they wanted him to do was a resonance, some x-rays too. They found a relatively big mass on his stomach that they will try to remove, and three cysts in his brain."

"*Fuck*," El cussed fully turning to Mike, resting her head on his chest

and he rubbed her back. "Fuck!"

"You did all you could, El," he said, but his consolation sounded a little empty. She sniffed and turned her head to look at Karen again.

"They have to start with the cysts," she said firmly and Mike's mom nodded.

"They didn't want to, but Hopper said he insisted. He said that if Will reacts well in the first 12 hours after the brain surgery, they will proceed with the removal of the stomach mass."

El sighed and held tighter to him, so Mike held her back just as tightly.

"How long does brain surgery like that usually last?" Lucas asked. "Do we even know if the thessal can be contained for that long?"

"It's already contained," El said knowingly. "Because of the venom, it's power is minimized, I just put everything in one place. Well, I mean, clearly not everything. *Fuck!*"

The lights blinked and everyone held their breaths for a moment; Mike held El by her shoulders and made her look at him.

"Babe, you did everything you could. It's better than the options we had before. Will is in surgery, and if the monster is out-"

"They will be one head short," Dustin completed. Mike nodded reassuringly and smiled at her.

"Don't you see what it means? You got to keep your promise, Ellie. Once they get the thessal out, it'll all be over. Babe, you saved him. You saved your brother."

El's lower lip trembled and a single tear dropped from her eye, streaming down her cheek. From his sides, Mike noticed Lucas and Dustin stepping up and starring at him, to his back he heard Jennifer say something about "doing it", but the phone rang and everyone's attention went back to Karen, who rushed to pick it up.

"Hello? Oh, hi Nancy! Is everything okay?" Karen said and Mike

stumbled to get to the phone, taking it from his mother roughly. "Michael!"

"Nancy? You got my message?"

"*I did!*" his sister practically shouted. "*What the fuck?*"

"It's Will, Nance, he's in Indianapolis to remove the pieces of the thessal in his body," Mike quickly explained.

"*You're joking?*"

"No."

"*Fuck. Mike, I have finals until next Monday.*"

"I know. But look, he'll have to have more than one surgery, so maybe there's time for you to come back."

"*Mike,*" Nancy sighed. "*Moira said that losing a head will make the monster extremely unstable, time is not an option!*"

Mike put some thinking in what she said and something came to his mind.

"I think we should wait for Hopper, see what he can do on his side. Remember a couple of years ago with the breeches? The Chief has some big influence."

Nancy hummed.

"*I'll talk to Steve. Jonathan might probably be on his way already. You let me know about every single thing that has been happening, understand?*"

"Yes, ma'am."

"*I'll be on the first plane to Indiana Monday afternoon.*"

"Can't wait," he said with a hint of sarcasm. "Oh, and Nance?"

"*Yeah?*"

"If you find your boss has some secret stash of monster killer

machines, get some for us."

Nancy laughed, but then got suddenly serious.

"*You know what, that's a good point. I'll see what I can do.*"

Mike hung up and looked at his friends and his mother, all of them looking at him, and suddenly he felt very exposed. Lucas raised an eyebrow at him, Dustin smirked. The best reaction came from Lexi, though.

"Okay, I have so many questions," she said breaking the silence. "Like, so many," she emphasized glaring at El and then at Mike with a hidden message that made him blush more. "Like, will they cut Will's beautiful hair? But I think the best way to start is by – and I mean it very respectfully, Mrs. Wheeler – *what the actual fuck just happened today?*"

"You know you chose the question with the longest answer, right?" El observed. "I'll probably have to head back home before we're halfway through. I don't live close by like you guys, remember?"

"You can stay here tonight, sweetie," Karen offered. Both El and Mike turned to her with wide eyes. "Nancy's room is empty, you can use it, it's no trouble."

"Uh…" El needed a few tries to speak, her eyes quickly glancing at Mike and then back to Karen. "Yeah, Nancy's room sounds like the right option."

Karen smiled lovingly. Mike had a clear image of not sleeping in his bed that night, but he didn't voice his plans.

"Why don't you go catch up in the basement? I'll make us some soup for dinner, everyone can stay."

"You're really nice, Mrs. Wheeler," Jennifer said with a soft smile and Karen smiled. "I just have to call my parents real quick."

"Me too," Lexi said and Mike jumped aside to make space for the girls. Dustin shrugged.

"Yeah, we really don't need to do that, we've been overstaying here for ages," he said and they laughed, including Karen.

"Well, you boys are always a delight," she said. "Now, out of the kitchen, I have to get to work."

On their way to the basement, they passed by Joyce with Holly and Callie watching TV and she hollowly greeted them. Mike didn't miss the heartbreaking way El looked at her, so he held her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, making her look up at him. He smiled at her softly and she leaned against him seeking comfort, something that he was more than glad to give.

They all needed to stick together for Will, and while he was there in the hospital fighting, they needed every resource to clash with the threat of the evil next universe. If the thessalmonster thought it could just take one of them without trouble, it had no idea of the consequences.

Let the seven heads come.

They were survivors, Mike and his friends, and they really liked a good fight.

12. silent rumble

Author's note: So, here we are. First of all, I'm sorry it took me over two months to write and publish this chapter after telling you guys that I'd be back with something sooner. Some things happened and in my defense, this chapter has over 18k words, so I guess it's a good apology, right?

This is the last chapter and after that, there will be an epilogue. It'd going to be much shorter, so I hope to write and post withing a couple of weeks. I'm also going to save the sentimentalities for later, since we'll see each other soon ;D

Also, this is the last fic of my "as strange as a normal person" trilogy, and I hope you enjoyed the ride that ends after these 39 pages of chapter 11.

Enough of that talk, you guys want chapter! Let me know if you liked at the end with a review ^^ (and please don't hate me)

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11. silent rumble

January, 1987

Will Byers

Light and darkness were one thing, it seemed. The yin and yang of the weight on his shoulders and the glue on his eyelids – they dictated his mind. At a first moment, Will had blinked a couple of times and tried to speak. He couldn't, there was a tube in his mouth. He chocked, throat sore because he'd been vomiting his guts out for hours and now this, dry as the deserts of Arizona that he was supposed to visit this spring for an art show.

Actually, he didn't know how dry Arizona was. He didn't even know if it *was* dry land, he just knew about the heat, and the sun, and he assumed.

His throat had protested again and the minute he coughed, trying to

reach for the tube and finding himself incapable of lifting his arms, a nurse was by his side, his face collected and friendly.

"Hello, William, I'm Nako, you are in Indianapolis General and you, young man, are a miracle. Now, I'll have to ask you to take a few deep breaths, can you do that?"

Scared and confused, Will nodded once, finding out that it was hard to move his head, and groaned in pain.

"Here, I'm gonna do it with you," Nako, the nurse, offered. "In, out. Very good. Again. In."

Out.

A couple more times and Will's heartbeat started to slow down, and with that he could understand the ambience better. A hospital room, clearly. Looked like ICU, he was the only one in the room. It was weird, because the room was so big. He couldn't look around much, having to rely mostly on his peripheral vision that was also blurry. He tried to raise his hands again, but even though he actually found the strength to do the movement, he was restrained to the bed.

Nako had a vial now, and he was removing the liquid with a needle. It was so similar to what Will had to go through less than two weeks ago that it made him try to recoil, granting him a lot more pain.

"It's morphine," Nako said showing him the vial. Will couldn't read what the words said. "You've just been through a brain surgery, William, less than twenty-four hours ago and you took it like a real pro. But you'll have to have another surgery soon. I'll give you some of this to help with the pain and then I'll report to the doctor. Try to get some rest."

After the morphine started to be pumped into his system and nurse Nako did a quick check up, scribbling down on papers on a clipboard before leaving the room, Will let his eyes close again. He had so many questions, but he was *so tired*.

In a last thought, he wondered about his mom. He hoped that she was all right.

The first thing he realized was the touch on his cheek as his eyes struggled to flutter open again. How long had it been? He couldn't tell – light and darkness were playing their trick again, making it impossible for him to really process his surroundings. That touch, however, was well known by Will, and he gladly leaned against the hand.

"Will, sweetie," his mother called ever so quietly, and though his eyelids were heavy, he made an extra effort to open them and focus on her. When she saw that he was seeing her, she opened a beautiful smile; for his surprise, her eyes were dry. "Hello, baby."

"Hi, Mom," he said, his voice hoarse.

Only after he spoke he realized that there was no tube down his throat this time. Will tried to raise his hands again, but he still was restrained and in his mind he frowned, but he wasn't sure his muscles were responding to his brain.

"What…" he started and then coughed. "Water."

"Yes, of course!" Joyce said letting go of him. She reached for a jar of water by the bed and poured some in a plastic cup, and then she got a straw. "See if you can suck."

Will had a smart reply for that and he even smirked, but he didn't have the voice or the wit to spill it out. Instead, he used what little strength he had to drink that lukewarm water that was terrible, but was the best he could have at the moment, and just that small gesture exhausted him.

"Mom," he called. The water had helped, but hadn't been nearly enough. Joyce left the cup by the jar and went back to his side, held his hand. "I-"

Her other hand went to his forehead and it occurred to him that he couldn't feel his hair at all, just that there was something wrapped around his head. The realization told him that there was no way he wasn't frowning then, but his eyes were dropping shut without his approval and sleep was quickly engulfing him, darkness taking over.

Funny, he didn't even process the light this time. Everything had been this blurry shade of grey, the only focused part of him was his mother. He opened his mouth to call her again, but only let out a sigh.

"Get some sleep, baby," Joyce said holding his hand tight, and then kissing his forehead.

Will didn't want to sleep, he already had slept enough! But damn, if he couldn't command his body at the moment! It sucked. It sucked worse than Brad Miller could suck, and that was something. Hah, he made the joke after all, even if only to himself. He was so funny. Hah.

"I'll be here when you wake up," his mother guaranteed, granting the serenity Will needed to let sleep take over. If there was one thing he knew for sure about Joyce was that she was a woman of her word.

And a woman of her word she proved to be.

When Will woke up again, feeling sore, but exponentially better, not only Joyce was there, but so was Jonathan and El informing that Hopper was outside with Callie. He drank a lot of water and complained about it being warm again, and after a round of doctors checked him up, he was allowed to stay in a semi-sitting position. Along with nurse Nako, El helped fix the bed and now less stiff, Will could take a better look around.

It didn't seem like he was in the ICU still, but to be quite honest he didn't remember much how the previous room looked like, if there even was a previous room. It didn't look like a hospital either, but maybe it was because Will wasn't in Hawkins General this time.

"What day is it?" he asked and El smiled at him before answering.

"December 27," she said. Through the annoying beeping machine attached to him they could see his heartbeat rising.

"*December 27?*" Will asked almost panicky. He felt a hand in his and looked down, realizing that he was still restrained.

Nine days. He'd been out for nine days! How was that possible?

"I missed Christmas," he said sadly and El shook her head.

"No, you didn't," she said and he looked at her. "Don't you remember?"

Will frowned, trying to remember. His mind was still a little scrambled, but he wasn't as slow as before. Faintly, he started to remember something… something… someone.

El.

She was here, at the hospital, in this room sitting on that hard sofa by the door. How did he know it was hard? In his memory, she suddenly looked up and turned to him smiling.

He's here, she had said and she got up, walked towards him reaching out. *Hello, brother. We were hoping you'd come.*

We, she said, and then everyone was there – his whole family, even Callie – all looking expectantly at El, waiting for her nod. She still reached out for him and finally he took her hand, feeling the electricity run through his soul. El sighed relieved and pulled him closer, guiding him to the sofa, ushering him to sit by her side. Oh, yeah, that was how he knew it wasn't comfortable.

The small table where he'd grown used to see the water jar sitting upon carried a small supper, and all sort of familiar faces sat around it. None of them knew for sure where to look or how to deal with this situation.

Hello, William, the person he had had less contact with greeted looking right at him. Terry Ives, with her brown hair in a braid that went over her shoulder and all the way down her waist, hands on her lap. *It's good to see you in your true form, Spreader.*

Spreader, the name Nancy had sent through the phone to her brother. Had it really been only six days prior to Will's fall? The fall they'd been trying to avoid for so long, a true collapse in Hawkins High's showers, how classy.

I still have my powers? Will had wondered and both El and Terry nodded.

He looked down at his hands realizing that he was visiting – visiting like El did when she was in camp last summer – and he didn't even need water for it!

Baby? His mother called and it was hard to take his eyes from his hands to look at her. He was free, but he was restrained still, memory and moment overlapping. Joyce was looking slightly to his left, but she got an A for effort. *We're glad you could join us.*

Will was glad too, for sure. Terry said that he was clean from the Flayer, and perhaps now he could enjoy his powers to the fullest, whatever that meant. His true spreader form resurfaced and he was just Will again, version two-point-o.

A clicking sound brought him back to reality and he focused on his hands that had blurred from a second. When he moved, raising his arms tentatively, the restrainers had been opened, and Will was pretty sure he'd been the one to do it.

The first thing Will did was check his hair that even through the bandage he could tell was gone. The realization made him groan and double over, only enough until his stomach protest, the muscles of his core crying in pain. He touched his torso, realizing that he was all banded in tight gauze in more than one place.

"Don't do that!" Joyce scolded and he pouted.

"They cut my hair off!" Will protested. "Please, tell me I don't look like a hooligan."

Jonathan laughed, Joyce scoffed, El understood nothing – he could tell.

"And you'll be on a liquid diet for a few weeks, I'm afraid," nurse Nako said suddenly by his side checking his vitals and raising his hospital shirt to check the dressings. Where did that guy even come from?

"What?" Will exclaimed, now fully terrified. No real food for weeks? That was just mean!

"There was a huge mass in your stomach, young man!" the nurse said

firmly. "Do you understand the gravity of the surgery you've gone through? Yes, your diet is restricted to liquids until further order and if you complain, they'll attach a tube directly to your intestines, are you happy with it?"

Defeated, Will pouted even more, but he couldn't add a cross of arms on top of it because Nako still was checking the bandages.

"Who even allowed you to be out of these?" he asked pointing at one of the restrainers.

"I did," Will said defiantly and the nurse raised an eyebrow at him.

"You are quarantined, young man," Nako said firmly, putting Will's shirt back down. "If you do anything, *anything* again to harm yourself, you'll be back in this *and* sedated."

Again? He tried to harm himself before?

Frowning, Will looked down at his arms again, this time paying better attention. Before, all he could see was the restrainers limiting his movements, but now he realized the purple marks all over from IVs twisted and pulled, the memories of him waking up dazed and gasping, ripping at the needles blindly came at him like echoes, his mother's voice calling for him in a desperate attempt to calm him down.

He gave those people and his family a rough time. He hoped it was over.

"When can I get home?" Will asked, his head low in shame, eyes turned away from them.

"That depends," Jonathan said, trying to come to his line of vision. "The doctors want to see if you'll stabilize. If so, maybe in a couple of days, we hope."

"For Mike's birthday?" he asked full of hope, accidentally looking over at his mother and El again, and he made a mental note to ask later why El was blushing.

"Hopefully," Joyce said.

"But try not to have too much hope," Nako, the nurse, said cutting his excitement short. "And you do look like a hooligan a little, but nothing a hat wouldn't fix until your hair grows a good amount again."

Heavyheartedly, Will sighed, but he couldn't stay too sad with his family around anyway.

"Hop says the fireworks are quite nice in the big city," Jonathan reasoned, making Will smile again. At least there was that.

He stepped into the New Year with short steps on cold floor until he reached the window to his hospital room, his stepfather fast asleep on the hard sofa by the door. Jonathan once told Will that their father lived in Indianapolis, but he hadn't visited him once.

His body protested, but the doctors said that he had to walk some every day to regain his strength. Will was a skinny boy, but built on muscles and everyone seemed positive that he'd have a fast recovery, now that he was stable. There still were purple marks all over his body, his throat was still scratchy and the stitches hadn't been removed yet, but the future, he was told, looked promising.

Through the window, Will could say for certain that the fireworks were indeed better here.

[...]

Elle Hopper

For Mike's birthday, El stayed over. Hopper was in Indianapolis, and she guessed everyone was still a little beaten up with what happened with Will to really care about her and Mike. Their getting back together barely caused any reaction – with the exception of the girls and Will, who only had to take one look at her and *know*.

"You whore!" Will had said with fake shock. "You're doing him!"

"Shut up!" El had hushed, because Hop had been right outside the door that day. Will held her wrist and pulled her closer, raising her hand and showing the ring Mike had gotten for her birthday. It meant nothing, really, she'd been wearing it for a while now, but Will

was hard to fool.

"*You smell of sex*," he said low looking right into her eyes and she blushed. "Didn't he have a girlfriend that wasn't you?"

"He broke up with her," she told him.

"Before or after fucking you?"

El blushed more and Will let go of her, crossed his arms judgmentally.

"I leave for a couple of days and see what happens!" Will said feigning disappointment. "Can't believe I broke his nose for nothing. Listen to me very closely, Elle Hopper, you watch out for him, understand me? Mike Wheeler is not to be trusted."

"He's your *best friend*."

"So what?"

"He asked for forgiveness," she said and Will frowned.

"Before or af-"

"I didn't let him talk before," El interrupted and immediately looked away. Will gasped.

"You horny whore!"

El would like to say that he was wrong, but he sort of wasn't. She did help Mike cheat on Spencer, even if he broke up with her the following morning, and she *was* horny at the time. Like she was at the moment, after the dinner and the fireworks, after shamelessly sneaking out of Nancy's room (*"Just tell me he still has that box of condoms"*) and joining Mike under his sheets.

"Said the biggest homewrecker of Hawkins!" she had replied instead and Will laughed so much he needed a little morphine for stomach pains.

Now she was on top of Mike and they kissed ever so slowly that it

was wonderful and excruciating at the same time. If there weren't pressing matters on them at the moment, she'd promptly say that she could die right there and then and she'd be happy. As long as she was in his arms.

The early morning was dark and dense as El drifted off, sleeping restlessly. There was something unsettling about the dream, even though all she could see was darkness and more darkness surrounding her. She stepped forward and the sound of water made her look down.

For a second, El could swear her heart would stop. The water was up to her shins and it was all too familiar, everything… everything, even her clothes, the sleeveless top, the plain shorts with heavy pockets… not that she was back to her child body, but El had to touch the curve of her hips and the hills of her breasts, the tips of her hair on her shoulders just to make sure that it was *her*.

She turned a full circle, the water splashing up her legs as she moved, heart racing. Those nightmares had left her sleep for months already, so something must have brought her there. Something… or someone.

Eleven, she was called and she stopped mid-spin, dead on her skin, sweating.

She *knew* it. She knew he'd call for her eventually, incessantly, firmer than the times he called for her before.

And she…

She had to get away from him.

The Bad Man that ruined her life.

Papa.

El opened her eyes gasping for air, desperate to get as far as possible from that dream, from Brenner. The quiet of the night contrasted awfully with her shallow breaths, and Mike's snores helped her to get back to reality.

She was fine. She was perfectly fine.

As a matter of fact…

El rubbed her eyes and face with both hands, pushed her hair back, her fingers tangling in the knots of the strands painfully. She had been sporting a perfectly pretty do just a few hours ago, and she did not want to know how her hair got so messy so easily. She sat up and looked around, glad for the moonlight that gave her enough light to find a flannel shirt by the foot of the bed that she put on, fingers still trembling sporadically.

She sighed, sitting Indian style on the bed, her back to the wall. It was warm inside, though it snowed the whole 31st , and time stretched as her heartbeat went back to a normal rate. Mike didn't even move, which was quite the improvement. He used to be such a light sleeper, anything would wake him up, but now he was getting some well-deserved rest.

A word came to her mind as she sat there, the radio-alarm blinking the time (4:31) at her, one only word with three different uses and meanings.

Papa, who'd raised her up to when she was twelve to be a killing machine, the greatest weapon this country would ever see. Who'd taken her from her mother and taught all the things El wished never learning. Who'd broken her almost beyond fixing. Why couldn't he be just *gone* was a mystery.

He was her Papa, all right, but he was as far from the figure the word wished to convey as one could be. A Bad Man with capital letters so different from her *Daddy*. Hopper, who left a long, detailed letter amongst her food one Christmas asking for forgiveness for his actions. A man who did things that broke his heart and hers, with honorable motives that weren't enough to justify her lack of security, and a man who never expected her to accept him.

Except she did accept him before anyone else in her new life. She chose him with gratitude. She told him – had she been offered the option, she'd do the same he did that 1983. After all, they defeated the Demogorgon together, all of them. She chose him, became Elle Jane Hopper, like she couldn't choose the other who carried the weight of the word on his back.

Father. Aunt Becky called him "provider" with a snarky tone that suggested that she didn't quite like him, but when El finally had gotten Mother to talk about him, Terry Ives still held that gleam about her. *First love*, she told El with sadness, *when it's real and strong it has a way of lingering even when it's over*. And El could feel it, the love Terry had for Nicholas Heron, her father, but she couldn't share that love.

All this time, her father had been nothing but trouble. He sent a messenger, the Demogorgon, to recruit people. He ate them up and they were reborn with the same shell and a new interior, wolves with sheep skin, and he almost took Will with him. *Her* Will, her *twin*. How could she ever *forgive* that?

Suddenly, El got all tensed up, back straight as she felt it – *him*, more than anyone else. She was quiet, listening, waiting. Hell, she'd been waiting for too long already. Their head was dead, shouldn't they be raging on the streets already?

El got up and out of bed, careful not to wake Mike up, and sat down by the window, legs up on the bench as she looked outside. She wanted to go out on the roof like they did so many times the year before, but there was a layer of snow, maybe a foot tall, covering everything in Hawkins, keeping her inside.

The sky was a clear deep blue, dusted with stars, an incredible contrast considering how much it had snowed the previous day, and the new moon was making everything shine silver.

It felt like El was sitting there for hours, bracing her leg, chin on her knee as she looked out, but when Mike stirred, his snore cut midway as he woke up startled, El checked the alarm clock and it was still far from 5 a.m.. Mike sat up, his hair as tussled as hers, sleep written all over his face. He rubbed his eyes and then looked to the empty space by his side, seeming a little confused. El said nothing, waiting for him to find her in the room, which happened fairly quickly.

"Can't sleep?" he asked pushing aside the covers and getting up. His boxer shorts were tilted to the side and he didn't bother to fix them as he joined her on the bench. El shook her head no.

"Bad dream," she said keeping her eyes on him until he sat by her side, and then she looked over the window again.

Mike followed her eyes and gasped.

"Look at that sky," he sighed, and El had to look at him again.

From her angle, Mike's pale skin reflected in silver, his freckles standing out on his cheekbones. He had built upper strength over the years, though he wasn't by any means as athletic as Will or Lucas, but that didn't bother her in the slightest. Leaning forward on the window, he looked out, up, keeping close and still respecting her personal space, even though El didn't really give many shits about keeping glued to him – they'd been apart for too long and each touch from him was not enough.

"In two weeks," Mike said still looking up the sky. El kept watching his profile, his voice was this husky morning welcome. "All the wolves will come out to play."

El frowned at that.

"Wolves?" she asked and he smiled.

"Full moon," he said, and only part of her processed its meaning, having watched as many movies as she could the past couple of years.

She looked out the window, to the silence of Hawkins and the empty cul-de-sac that had been blasting with people and music a few hours ago, firing roman candles at the sky and sharing midnight kisses with their loved ones. Unconsciously, El reached for Mike's hand, he gasped surprised and watched her hold him, lace their fingers together before he could raise her hand and kiss her knuckles softly, a flutter of lips on her skin.

"Something on your mind?" Mike asked, her hand still close to his lips. El didn't stop looking outside as she answered him, hoping that he'd understand what she meant.

"It's too quiet."

And it had absolutely nothing to do with the abnormal cold in the air, nor with the ice and snow on the ground. It wasn't the quiet of winter hibernation and bedding seeds.

It was dead quiet.

Dead like the Upside Down was quiet.

Dead like fear was quiet.

Quiet like the underset was deadly.

The wolves would come to play, alright, at the breakers of the storm.

El looked at Mike and he was looking at her, his eyes soft, but understanding. See why she loved him so much? He always got it; he always knew what she meant. He sat more relaxed, his back to the window, and she relaxed too, stretching her legs over his, sliding closer to rest her head on his shoulder. They sat like that for a while, one of his arms around her shoulders, the other on her thigh, she holding on to his middle until they decided to go back to bed.

It was past five in the morning when El snuggled on Mike's chest under the heavy covers, listening to the steady beats of his heart; soft, black chest hair tickled her nose. He smelled of sweat and musk; they fell in uncontrollable giggles when he tried to run his fingers through her hair and got tangled in the knots, the laughing led to kissing and the kissing to a whole lot more.

They just could not keep their hands off each other.

Not many hours after they finally fell asleep, Karen Wheeler first knocked at Nancy's door twice and waited for her older daughter to let her in. When she opened the door, she only found Nancy in the room working through a set of weapons that concerned her greatly, to the point that she was too afraid to ask.

"Where's Ellie?" she asked and Nancy looked down at her hands, to the greased cloth that she was using to clean the automatic she had brought from Maine.

"Not… here…" she answered slowly, unsure of how much she could

give away. Karen frowned.

"Did she sleep here?"

Nancy pouted uncomfortable, and then looked at her mother.

"…define 'here'."

That silly game annoyed Karen to pieces, she knew that Nancy had been covering for Mike ever since she got home, and she was so done with that.

"Nancy," she said warningly. Nancy smiled weakly.

"Did you try Mike's room?"

And that was why she strutted into her son's room without knocking, aware that it might not be a good idea but incapable of being rational about it. For a moment, she thought that maybe Elle wasn't there. Mike was sleeping on his side, his back to the door, but then she looked around the room.

It was a mess. A complete and utter mess, clothes and books everywhere, cushions on the floor. And Ellie's pretty red dress that Karen herself had helped her pick at the store's sale a couple of days ago slumped on the desk, her lacy bra hanging from the bed's post. Karen glanced at the trashcan near the door and quickly averted her eyes, not willing to count how many discarded condoms that were in there and she took a deep breath, eyes briefly closing, before stepping closer to the bed.

Mike and Elle were spooning under the comforter, and it crossed Karen's mind that her son – her only baby boy – was all grown up, for the reason she hadn't initially seen Elle there was because his shoulders were so broad. To her relief, they were dressed, even though that didn't mean much.

Hell, she knew that they'd been at it since that day when Will had to be taken to Indianapolis, Elle stayed over and she found Mike in Nancy's bed with her despite the fact that he *still* dated the Hall girl at the time, but it still was hard to wrap her mind around it.

She reached out and shook Ellie lightly, the intensity of her movement growing as the girl didn't wake up until her eyes opened lazily. Sleepy, Elle pushed her hair from her face and looked around, careful not to disturb Mike, from what Karen could see.

"Ellie," Karen said trying to keep her cool. "Your father is on the phone."

El frowned; after last night's over-thoughts it was a little hard to understand what Karen meant.

"Hopper," Karen tried again. "He wants to talk to you."

Suddenly awake, El sat up, her hair sticking up in every direction. The flannel she was wearing was half-buttoned, showing enough cleavage. If Karen hadn't had her wild years during the peak of the hippie era, she'd be outraged.

"*Fuck*," El mumbled rubbing her face and then shakily getting out from under the comforter and jumping over Mike.

"You can use the phone in Nancy's room," Karen offered watching El quickly fix her shirt before stepping out of the room.

"Thanks, Mrs. K," she said sincerely and walked out, stumbling to Nancy's room and going in without knocking.

From the bed, Nancy watched El drop by the bed and pick up the phone.

"Are you okay?" she asked and El shrugged, her head on the side of the bed.

"I'm just a little sore," El answered and Nancy scoffed. "Hello?"

"*Ellie, you hurt?*" Hopper asked on the phone, sounding worried.

"Nah, it's not that. Is everything okay?"

"*What took you so long?*"

"I was sleeping," El said. "What's wrong?"

"*Nothing is wrong*," Hopper said, a gleeful hint in his voice. "*As a matter of fact, everything is great!*"

Before he said anything, El already knew. It was just something that came over her sudden and entirely, and some of the weight was lifted from her shoulders. Nancy offered her a glass of water and a couple of aspirins that she gladly accepted.

"*We're going home*," Hopper said. "*We're taking Will home*."

Will was recovering in record time, according to the doctors. He was building strength again, gradually gaining the weight he'd lost. His surgery stitches were healing nicely, his hair growing again, even though it was too soon for it to make any difference. Slowly but surely his brain was rewiring and he could read again, none of his motricity had been affected. He could go back to school in a couple of weeks, and within a month or two get back to harder hitting sports, like running and swimming.

"Then why the attitude?" Jennifer asked. Everyone came to visit on the Saturday before classes would be back from winter break, crowding the Byers boys' room.

El smirked and she looked across the room at Jonathan, who shared the smirk. Lexi was sitting on the bed with Will, holding his hand tenderly, but whenever Will listened to his medical progress, he pouted dramatically.

"Because," Jonathan said. "The doctor said that he can't have sex for a month. And even after that, he'd have to stick with vanilla."

They all looked at each other silently for a moment, and then they all burst into laughter, except for Lexi, who looked at Will sympathetically. Dustin had to sit down, laughing so hard he lost his breath, and Mike covered his face trying to control himself.

"Dude, that must've been a *hard* one for you," Lucas joked. "Right to the *bone*."

Jennifer snorted. Will just looked more annoyed.

"Look, it's not that big a deal," Mike said after taking a deep breath to

get it together. Dustin was still laughing on the floor. "You don't *need* to have sex every day of the month."

Will looked dead at Mike for a long second, then at El, and then back at Mike, and when he spoke, the words came out slow and sharp.

"Come again, Wheeler?"

Lucas whistled, Jennifer and Lexi exchanged a look, Dustin avoided looking in their direction and Jonathan crossed his arms as Mike got fifty shades of red. El rolled her eyes.

"*Will*," she warned and he sighed. "We just want you to recover nicely, okay? So don't go on being reckless."

"Yeah, whatever," he replied crossing his arms, but she knew he was listening. No one wanted him to get better more than himself, it was what he wanted since he was finally taken from the Upside Down in 1983. He wouldn't jeopardize it now. "Are you guys getting ready for war?"

"Don't even think about it," Jonathan said with a definitive tone.

"It's a yes or no question!" Will protested, hands up.

"Yes," Jonathan said. "But you have nothing to do with that. You're free from the heads, and you're safe."

"Bullshit."

"No, it's not," El said firmly. "We need you to stay safe, Will, for everyone's sake."

Because he was the spreader and he could make not only El, but also her mother Terry stronger. And if he wasn't focused on them, the other heads could use his powers to strengthen *them* too, and that wouldn't make it a fair fight.

"If it's any consolation, I have a job for you," Mike said and Will looked at him as he took a notebook from his backpack. "Nancy's birthday is at the end of the month and I wrote a story for her. I'd like you to illustrate it for me."

Facing the prospect of drawing, Will dropped everything and reached for the notebook that Mike was offering him eagerly. He'd been dying to draw ever since he woke up in that hospital bed and now he had the perfect excuse. Eagerly, he read over the first couple of paragraphs and the ideas already flooded his brain, Mike's own pencil dragon only a draft of what Copper would be by his hand.

"Well," Will said smiling. "I have two extra free weeks, so I guess it's going to be easy."

Except that it wasn't.

By the third day, when his hand refused to obey his mind, Will grew grumpier and grumpier, throwing things around the room and smoking angrily on the front porch. That was where El found him when she got back from the first day of school, sitting on the cold bench wrapped in warm clothes with his knees to his chest, starring into nothing, a cigarette burning between his fingers.

"Will?" El called stopping by his side. He didn't look at her and she knew better than to ask about the illustrations, even though she believed it was too soon for him to be beating himself up for it.

"Weren't you supposed to be at the store today?" he asked.

"I'm leaving in thirty minutes, and I was wondering if you'd like to come with," she said and he looked at her frowning. "I'm sure Solomon would like to see you, and I'm sure you could use getting out of the house a little. Mom will drive me, and-"

"Okay," Will said suddenly, interrupting her. "Why not, right?"

Surprised, El watched him smash the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray and get up. Will smelled of smoke, but she didn't hesitate to hug him when they were face to face. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but in some way she knew that it was too soon, much too soon. What mattered was that he was *here*.

El let go of him and smiled, took his hand and they headed inside. She said that she only had to change and get something to eat, and Joyce said that whenever they were ready, they'd be going.

They quickly got ready, El changed the heavy jacket and top for a black second skin, a white tee, a flannel and a jeans jacket over everything, keeping the jeans pants and boots she wore for school. She got a beanie, a scarf and gloves, and she was all set to go outside again.

After Will collapsed in school and El spent a whole couple of days recovering, she had to go do some damage control and ended up officially landing a job at the record store replacing Will. For her, she was only filling in and would be willing to step back as soon as he got better, but on the other hand it was good to stop doing "magic tricks" at kids' parties, if you asked her, and have a real job with a check every weekend.

"Well, how do I look?" Will asked coming out of his room. He had changed to black clothes, wrapped a black kerchief around his head and added a hat on top of it. El and Joyce exchanged a worried look.

"I know what *Lucas* would say," El said carefully and Will sighed lowering his head and taking the hat and kerchief off with one motion. "Can't you just put a beanie on and get over it?"

"*Fine*," he complained and went back to his bedroom. El looked at Joyce again and she shrugged.

"Is he going with you?"

"Yeah."

"You keep an eye on him, okay, sweetie?"

"*I can hear you!*" Will shouted from the bedroom and from her baby chair Callie complained. She'd gotten used to a silent house.

El called shotgun and Will went in the back seat with Callie. It was a quick drive downtown and with no ice on the roads it took no time at all for them to go through the back door. It was a little after 3 p.m. and Solomon was by the counter lazily reading a comic book when El called out.

"What's that they say about the living showing up?" she said behind Will, pushing him forward and Solomon practically dropped his book,

so fast he got up.

"Kid!" he exclaimed, wide eyes showing an amazement that El didn't really understand. The store owner put a hand on Will's shoulder heavy, but tenderly and shook him once. He spoke all at once, hardly giving space for answers. "You gave us quite the scare, Willy, what the hell! What took you so long to come, huh? You worried me there, boy, for a moment I thought I'd lose my best seller, but your sister has been covering your ass, as usual."

Solomon stopped for a moment and put his other hand on Will's other shoulder. He was a tall man, as tall as Mike and twice as large, but under all that build was a caring person.

"I'm the only seller you have," Will said jokingly and Solomon smiled.

"Not anymore, kid," he said looking over Will's shoulder at El and she smiled too.

In no way Solomon was a sentimental person, at least not that they knew of. He was from Hawkins, but went to college in Seattle and came back knowing more about music than anyone El and Will knew. Some said he dated one of the hairstylists of Leslie's Beauty Parlor, where Nancy had worked during the summer, some said he lived alone in a house full of birds, and there was no way to tell what was the truth. What they did know was that Solomon cared, and he didn't need hugs or sappy words to show it.

"If we get the word around," El said interrupting the moment before it'd get awkward. "That Will is here, maybe we will even get some customers today."

"You know what, Ellie, you're absolutely right," Solomon said crossing his arms. "We got a new stash of the new Queen album that I'm sure Will's fan club will love."

El scoffed and Will gave him the finger as he passed by him to the front of the store.

"Joke is on you, old man, Queen rules," he said firmly, finally taking off his jacket and scarf and leaving it under the counter.

"Well, since you're here, I'm gonna go grab something to eat real quick," Solomon said looking at El and she nodded as she took of her jacket. "I'll be back in 15."

It was warm inside, comfortable. Through the glass window, they could see the ice cream shop where El had first reencountered her friends almost two years ago, a sign on their window telling them that there was a special price for the cappuccino and brownie combo. El left her jacket on top of Will's under the counter and checked the book to see what had arrived, there was a Guns 'n Roses album that was taking forever to arrive and she wanted to listen to it.

The store was nice and quiet as El checked the stash of albums according to the books, but suddenly there was music in the air and she looked up to see Will by the turntable. He was holding Fleetwood Mac's *Mirage* album and smiled at El when he saw that she was looking at him.

"You know, they're supposed to release a new album this year," she told him, something she had heard just a couple of days ago.

"About time," Will said. He gave the disc's case to her and she put it by the counter, so everyone would know what was playing. "But if you tell anyone I like them, I'll have to kill you."

"Will," El said smirking. "Everyone knows you like Fleetwood Mac."

His eyes bulged dramatically and he stepped back, a hand to his chest.

"What? I… have to flee this town."

El laughed then, and he laughed with her until they stopped talking altogether and she got back to work. She thought that maybe he'd decided to change the album, but it was a good one and he kept it on. Will joined her behind the counter and then fished a folded notebook from the pocket of his jacket, opened it and stared at the first page sighing.

It was Mike's dragon story, his story for Nancy. From all El knew, it didn't have an end yet, Mike told her that he couldn't quite figure it

out because there was an ending that he wanted, and an ending that the story wanted, if she knew what he meant. She didn't, not really. But in some way, she did. Sort of. As if the concept is just at arm's reach, but something is pulling her back.

Besides, no one could hold her accountable for anything related to writing. She liked the words – if they were out loud, spoken up, out of radios and mouths, told -, but the moment they had to be lain on paper, they became nightmarish. Her C+ last semester was the biggest win of the school year so far.

"Give me a pencil, will you?" Will requested and El looked at him mildly worried.

"Are you…" she started, but he was looking at the page with concentration, his fingers marking a paragraph about a bridge, his other hand with the palm up as he waited for the pencil. El gave him hers.

"Thanks, Sis," he said and got a sheet of paper from the drawer without even looking. He knew the place too well after over six months working there.

For a moment, El watched him do nothing. Right hand on the blank paper, left going over the lines of the story again, and again, and yet another time, and she worried – worried that he would overthink and overtry and end up underdoing what he was asked to do, worried that the he'd lost his capacity to draw because of the brain surgery, drawing being the one thing he loved to do the most and the surgery being her fault, because she didn't clean him right.

Will's hand moved, one curvy, faint line in the middle of the paper, and El looked away, tried to give him some space. She got another pencil from the cup by the cash register and got back to work.

The siblings worked on their private projects for about an hour with equal focus, hardly stopping when Solomon came back with hot coffee cups for them; he condemned the album that was playing, changed it for Scorpion's *Love at First Sting* that El didn't know, but had been the album Mike listened to for weeks after their break up back in June, and then he spent the rest of the afternoon in the back

room making calls.

They were interrupted only twice after that. El was organizing the pop section in alphabetical order when the front door opened with a *ding*, a client that stepped inside uncertainly and closed the door behind them.

"Hello, good afternoon!" El greeted pushing the drawer of discs back in place before she turned around and saw that the client was actually… "Oh. Hi, Spencer. How can I help you?"

Spencer Hall stood there just staring at El for a second or two, her gloved hands picking at each other nervously, and then she stepped ahead.

"Uh… I was just…" she looked around quickly and then reached for the nearest section, which was Disco.

El frowned as she watched Spencer pick up an ABBA album and check it with little interest. She turned to Will, who had stopped drawing to look at them, his elbow on the counter, chin resting on his hand, and he raised an eyebrow to her subtle shrug. Spencer went as far as the letter C in the section and then drummed her fingers on the whole set absently before looking at El again.

"Maybe I should look it up in Indianapolis," she said apologetically.

"What is it you're looking for?" El asked, even though part of her knew what Spencer was looking for, all right. "Let's see if I can help you."

"It's nothing, really, just this song I heard on the radio…"

The radio, huh? Mike was working at Hawkins' Pirate station, the main rock 'n roll station of the town – a job he'd wanted for over a year but his father had never allowed him to take, like this job at the store that El had now. El said nothing about it.

"You don't know the band?" she asked instead and Spencer shook her head no. "You remember part of the song?"

"Hm…" Spencer mumbled avoiding eye contact, and then hummed a

melody that El was pretty sure she knew.

"*Walk Like an Egyptian*," Will said only after a few seconds of humming and then El recognized it as well. "Pop Rock, letter B of Bangles. As in the name of the band."

Spencer blushed and El gave him the tongue.

"Here," El said, getting to the Pop Rock section. It was easy to find the album, because it was more recent and they had gotten some for Christmas. "Mike got one of these yesterday, because the one they had was scratched. Some bad DJ-ing or something. You want to listen to it before you decide to buy?"

"I don't know…" Spencer said working hard to focus on the track list instead of in El.

"It's okay, listen some," she said pointing at the turn table and then she went to it, took off the album that was playing – U2's *The Unforgettable Fire*, they were in a throwback vibe that afternoon – to let her listen to the album.

She offered the headphones to Spencer, who reluctantly took it and got to put the album to play, and as soon as the music started El turned to Will, glaring at him.

"Be nice!" she hissed and he dropped his hand on the counter.

"You know I don't do bullshit," he hissed back leaning closer. "She doesn't want no album, she wants to check you out!"

"I know, but shut up!" El exclaimed and then looked down, for the first time actually seeing the drawings Will was making. Plural, because there were at least four pages now, all connected to the other somehow, as if he was putting together a poster puzzle. It still was in the sketch phase, but it looked awesome. "Holy shit, Will! This is so neat!"

"Too soon to tell, but I kind of agree," he said.

El picked one of the papers up, the one with the sketch of the dragon, and she looked at it intently, paying attention to all the marks and

possibilities hidden in those simple lines, already amazed to see what Will could do with just paper and pencil.

"You know, that's why I love you, right?" Will said, again with his head on his hand, and El looked at him with a curious raised eyebrow. "You appreciate art like it should be done, with… innocence and wonder."

El smiled.

"There's just so much to see," she said in a quiet voice and he nodded once.

The nice moment lasted only that – a moment. Suddenly, the temperature dropped considerably, at least for El and Will, whose backs got a little straighter and hearing went a little sharper. Under their long sleeves, the hair of their arms stood up and with a gulp El turned around slowly, afraid of what, or who, she would see.

There had been no *ding* from the door, but right across the store that wasn't very big, stood a tall man with platinum hair, the same way he stood at the door of her room so many times, so long ago. He looked exactly the same, nothing more, nothing less, even though El knew damn well that he was nothing like before.

He stepped forward and El stepped back, hitting her back on the counter, the noise making her jump. She was sweating, which was crazy – it was too cold to break sweat, too chilly to damp foreheads and armpits. He stopped at least, made no move towards her again, and she could swear that there was a certain… worry in his eyes, as if he was capable of such a human thing.

"Eleven," he said and she shook her head. Papa was no human, had never been, but she could feel his otherworldly power from here and she *did not like* that feeling.

"That's not my name," she replied with a bravado that covered the dread up her spine quite nicely. Papa cocked his head.

"It is to me."

She frowned.

"Yeah?" El said and gulped. "Well, fuck you for that."

At that, his expression changed to some sort of sadness. It was so foreign coming from him, and it made her uneasy.

"Eleven, don't be like tha-"

"You don't get to tell me how to be," she interrupted mercilessly. "You suck! You took me from my mother, you fucked me up, but I'm free now. I don't ever have to listen to you again."

Taken aback, Papa stepped back. She sure hoped that he would never come back, even though that was a bit of a wishful thinking. The only way to stop him from coming back would be killing him, and El wasn't so sure she'd be able to do such thing. She could, probably. But that didn't mean she would. She wasn't sure.

"Okay," he finally said and stepped back. "I won't bother you, but you'll have to listen to this one thing I have to say."

El scoffed in an 'as if' way, crossing her arms and all, but she waited to hear what he had to say anyway. He cut to the chase right away.

"It all goes down tomorrow night, Eleven," he said and looked over her shoulder at Will. "You fucked it up for us, Mind Flyer, and it's been crazy out there, but we've got it now, and it goes down tomorrow. I'd avoid the Nemeton if I were you."

She knew what he meant, of course. They had been figuring out a new plan now that they were one head short, and apparently the plan was set. The Thessalmonster her father created, it would be coming for blood, and they were in their way, they would be the first. And Papa told her exactly where they would be, not to keep her clear from the place, but to lure her in.

Sneaky bastard.

El turned around looking at Will, whose eyes immediately locked on hers. They gulped almost in sync and when she looked at the door again, Papa was gone.

The air warmed up again and they let out the breath they were

holding. Solomon would've said that they wouldn't be that synchronized if they were actual twins, but the joke would fall flat between the siblings. It still was a quarter past four, and the clock was ticking.

It would go down the next night. El didn't think Papa would lie about it. She joined Will behind the counter and they started to talk quietly about what to do, who to tell first, how to tell, where to go, without realizing that the turntable had stopped and even with the headphones on Spencer Hall heard everything.

[...]

Nancy Wheeler

The chatter of the boys kept the silence from the basement of the Wheeler's house. If they weren't talking, the louder sound in the room would be the *click* and *clack* of the guns Nancy and Jonathan were loading.

It was a bit of an amazing amount of guns, and Steve would be arriving with more soon. The boys were trying to convince Lexi and Jennifer to stay inside that evening and in parallel there was a talk about how they were supposed to *fight* if they didn't even knew *how*.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Will exclaimed. They were all at the door letting the freezing air get in. Forecast was promising snow that night again, and for all they knew there was a head that could freeze things, so the odds weren't that good. "Guys, we've been doing that for *years* and you still don't know how to fight?"

"You gotta admit that we kind of lucked out every time," Dustin argued and Lucas rolled his eyes. Nancy and Jonathan exchanged a look.

"Lucked out?" Will exclaimed. "I almost died *three times*! I'm running out of lives here and you're calling it luck?"

"You're not a cat, Will," Jennifer deadpanned, hands on her hips and Will scoffed offended.

"Excuse me, have you seen this?" he asked pointing at his own face.

Nancy had to turn her back from them so they wouldn't see her laugh. She checked the clip of the gun and then looked at her watch. They still had a couple of hours until sundown, and according to El, Brenner said "the night", so there wasn't a way to know exactly *when* they'd cross the line.

"You know," Jonathan said to her. "I know we try not to be related to Lonnie in any way, but he's the only one Will could get that confidence from."

"Come on," Nancy said looking at him. "Wasn't you and your mother who taught him to be his own person?"

"We did, yes," Jonathan said. "But he still was a scaredy cat. When he came back from the Upside Down… I thought the PTSD would drive him crazy, but he flipped the table and now…" they both looked back at the door, saw that Will was saying something to Lexi.

"Now he's so confident it's annoying?" she suggested and Jonathan looked at her with a smirk. "Let's face it, one of those losers should be the comic relief."

"How's Will the comic relief?"

"He's so sure of himself that he's the most likely to trashmouth."

Jonathan nodded, considering her answer and Nancy offered him the gun she was holding. They needed to leave in fifteen minutes tops if they wanted to be there before the sun went down.

"Nancy?" a small voice called from the basement's stairs and she looked up to see her little sister watching her with wide eyes. "What's all that? Is everything okay?"

"This?" Nancy said with a gulp. "It's just a precaution, Hol, you don't need to worry."

"That's a lot of guns," she said, her voice small. Holly began to pout and Nancy saw some heartbreaking tears pool in her eyes. "You can get hurt."

"No! No, sweetie, I won't. I know how to handle these, I promise."

Holly looked around the room.

"Where's Mikey?" she asked and Nancy looked at the door. Mike was coming in with a confused expression, probably because El had sent him in without explanation. "Mike!"

Holly made to go downstairs, but Mike gestured for her to stop and went to her instead. She immediately jumped in his arms, holding him tight and he looked at Nancy with raised eyebrows. Nancy only shrugged apologetically. What could she have said?

"Mikey, it's dangerous," Holly hiccupped as he rubbed her back.

"You don't need to worry about that, Fozzie," he said soothingly. "We've got it all covered and we'll be back soon. You see, we have the police and the army with us."

"You do?" she asked. She was sobbing dramatically.

"We do," Mike said, cleverly keeping out the fact that they only had one cop with them – Hopper – and one military – Steve – who was actually naval, not army. Holly didn't need to know the details, she was too young for that. "You shouldn't be here anyway, let's go back up. Come on, you're too big for laps."

"But not for piggy-backs," Holly said letting go just enough to be able to look Mike in the face and he smiled.

"*Fine*," he said as if it was an annoyance and Holly didn't even need to step down to hop on his back, he just turned her around making her laugh in the process.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Will voiced everyone's concern.

"Where the hell is Steve?" he exclaimed. "We gotta go, go, go."

"Who the fuck is 'we'?" asked Jonathan and Will sighed.

"You," he corrected. "Gotta go before it's too late, catch the motherfuckers by surprise."

"He'll be here any moment," Nancy said. "And he's got some props for

you guys, to even the fight."

"Neat," Lucas exclaimed. From what Nancy knew, he was the only one who had training with weapons, because of his father's military background and concern about his well being. "Can't really take down a monster with a butterfly knife."

"Cool, and what about me?" Will asked anxiously moving from foot to foot.

"You're staying here," Mike said from the stairs, coming back to the basement.

"Yeah, with the ladies," Will said. "You think I should stay weaponless when I'm the one they wanted in the first place? Is that a good idea?" he looked at Nancy, who looked at Jonathan, who looked at him. "Come on, Jon, I'm better at this than you! As a matter of fact, I can shoot better than any of these useless, except maybe for El!"

Nancy kept her eyes on Jonathan, because he was older and he'd know what would be better for his brother, and almost at the same time he sighed, she reached for an automatic on the table that she was considering leaving home anyway, because she didn't quite understand it.

"Here," she said putting the gun in his hand. "Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes," Will said taking the gun and expertly unlocking the safety, pointing it at the wall, holding with both hands and taking aim. "How many bullets?"

"Eight, here's the extra pent," Nancy said. Will locked the safety on again and got the pent she was offering him. "More bullets. They are special, with some sort of paralyzing substance on the tip that blows when the contact is in high speed or something like that."

"Does it have a manual?" Will asked frowning and she put a thick notebook on top of everything. "*Great.*"

They could hear a car parking nearby, doors opening and closing noisily, and chatter, and Nancy noticed that Dustin and Jennifer

weren't there with them, while Lexi had stayed. By the way she was helping Will, Nancy guessed she had stayed to keep him company. Steve burst through the door two minutes after.

"Who's ready to kick some ass?" he exclaimed loudly, arms open, a large black case in his right hand, and they all shushed him.

"There are babies in the house!" Mike hissed.

"HOLY SHIT GUYS! GRENADES!" Dustin shouted getting inside behind Steve, holding a black sack, and that time even Steve turned to him shushing. He stopped short, the sack dangling dangerously in his hand. "Damn."

"Babies!" Steve said. "In the house!"

"Sorry!"

"Hey, where's the girlfriend?" Steve asked.

"Went back home," Dustin said and pointed back using his busy hand. Steve took the sack from him.

"Okay, no grenades for Dustin!" he said and joined the others.

Will was going through the notebook Nancy had given to him, El was checking Nancy's guns and picking a couple, handing them to Mike, just for him to put them back down again. Steve put the case on the table and opened it, revealing a great deal of weapons that were borderline medieval, including a spiked bat in the likes of the one they used back in 1983 and 1984, rest in peace.

Dustin was particularly interested in it and took it without permission, stepping away and giving a tentative swing. Steve got closer to him and took the bat back shaking his head.

"No?" Dustin asked.

"No," they all said together.

Steve gave the bat to Mike.

"Heard you struck a home run last year," he said weirdly proudly and Mike frowned at the bat.

"Yeah, *on accident*."

"Bullshit," Steve guaranteed and then he got a shock gun from the case, offered it to Dustin. "Here, know how to use it?"

"Sure!" Dustin exclaimed and pointed the gun. Everyone in its line stepped away, except for Will, who was focused on his reading. Dustin sighed exasperated. "Relax, guys, I'm not gonna sh-"

His finger slipped on the trigger and two sparkling electric wires went straight in Will's direction. He looked up just in time, startled by everyone's shout, and the wires stopped midair, Will's eyes wide open. Slowly, he looked from the wire to Dustin, a drop of blood coming down his nostril, and then the dispositive fell on the floor.

"Who the fuck put a gun in Dustin's hand!" Will shouted. Steve already was taking the gun from him and removing the used device, replacing it for a new one and handing it to Jonathan as Dustin apologized.

"Do you know anything from my dad?" El asked and Steve nodded.

"He's on his way there already, with back up," he said and she breathed relieved. "I've something for you, Ellie," Steve said and reached inside the sack that Dustin had been carrying less than five minutes ago; he got a belt full of grenades and offered it to her and her eyes widened. "It's simple enough, Jon can show you how to trigger them on our way there."

Hesitantly, she accepted it and put it on carefully. Nancy peeked inside the case, seeing a bunch of knives, a smaller black case, some odd little balls, even a hunting rifle. Lucas stepped closer, pulled by Steve.

"Do you still have that slingshot of yours?" he asked and Lucas frowned.

"Yeah, but…"

"You still know how to shoot it?" Lucas nodded. "Then… these are for you."

He put the small case in Lucas' hands and the boy opened it, revealing a brand new slingshot all in back that made his jaw drop.

"Now, that's just a normal slingshot, what's gonna make her the monster killer are these," Steve said, handing him the package of little balls. "Careful with them, they are quite deadly. Naval special."

"Nice," Lucas said smiling and tying the package to his belt. "Can I have a pair of knives too?"

"I thought you just said you couldn't win a fight with knives," Will said with a smirk.

"Can't be too careful!" Lucas replied.

"Shit, the hour!" Jonathan exclaimed. "We have to leave *now* if we want to make it before twilight."

Everyone started gathering things quickly. They would go in two cars – Steve's and Jonathan's – and it was a good half hour drive with no traffic 'til the Nemeton. The Nemeton was, according to El, a naturally supernatural place so strong that she had been drawn there when she ended up in the Upside Down three years ago. It was where the government had built the prototype of the first National Laboratory of Hawkins, now an abandoned warehouse, and Nancy suspected that it was exactly where the ley lines crossed, Nicholas Heron's Hawkins' Axis.

Funny how it started there and it was there where it was going to end.

"Hold on, I still don't have any weapons!" Dustin exclaimed.

"We'll figure it out on the way!" Mike said helping gather Nancy's guns.

She turned to Will then, who was having this silent conversation with El, and pulled his arm towards her. He was about a head taller than her and sometimes she couldn't believe how much those boys had

grown.

"Look, there's a rifle and bullets in my closet, on the higher shelf," she told him.

He was right about one thing – he had nearly been one of the heads, and being clean of their dark magic did not stop him from being a target. If God forbid any of those monsters escaped and came after him, he had to be able to fight them off and protect their families.

"If any monster comes-" she continued and he nodded.

"Gun them down with no second thought," he said and she nodded. "My mom and sister are here too."

"I know, that's how I know you'll take the shot."

"Nance!" Mike called from the door.

"Going!" she shouted. Any warning about babies had been forgotten the past ten minutes, she realized. "There are other weapons there too. Make good use of them."

"I will," Will guaranteed. Lexi was by his side looking at them anxiously; Nancy felt bad for the girl, thrown in that madness with little warning. "Nance," he called and she looked at him. "Will you be able to take the shot too?"

Nancy gulped and nodded somberly.

"I have to," she said and left before anyone would call for her again. The clock was ticking.

Hopper was waiting at the edge of the woods, a hoard of black cars parked lazily in the dirt. If there was anyone who knew how to get to the Axis as well as El, it was him, and after weapons were passed down and everyone had something in hand, he guided them. Turned out that Steve wasn't the only military figure in that place, because Hopper's contacts had showed up too, people from the Department of Energy that had worked in the closing of breeches in 1984, all masks and guns, were gathered around.

The temperature dropped considerably as they found cover around the Nemeton, the sun set quickly behind the trees, final yellow flashlights between tree trunks. If the thessalmonster was as deadly as they were led to believe, perhaps not every one of them would see the light of day again.

It was barely five-thirty when it was completely dark, and their breath condensed in front of their faces. The silence was deep and the wait was excruciating. Up in the sky, the moon was a thin line in first quarter, providing little to no light and kept being sporadically covered by thick clouds. Nancy wanted to look up at the sky, a habit that lingered from her childhood years of observing constellations and wishing upon shooting stars, but it was just not possible at the moment.

With a hand on her back and the other on the holster of her left leg, she waited. To her right, Steve stepped closer, sharing body heat. She leaned against him, comfortable to have him this close after being apart for so long, and he held her hand, the one that was on her back. To her left, Jonathan approached too. Part of them knew that in the dark people couldn't see them, and so he held their hands too, sandwiching Steve's hand between his and hers.

And they kept waiting.

Waiting.

For an hour or maybe more, probably less. For an awful lot of time.

Waiting and thinking that perhaps Brennan tricked them, and the monster would show up somewhere else, tear down the town and leave them alive to feel useless amongst the ghosts of their loved ones.

When Will and El reunited everyone the previous night to tell them about Brennan's apparition and quick note, Hopper raised that possibility – of him being cunning enough to set a trap and leave them vulnerable -, but Terry Ives had guaranteed that in his own twisted way Brennan loved El, and he wouldn't want her to go into such an important fight blind. Because of her argument, they believed him, and now they were second-guessing that decision.

Under their feet, the earth rumbled silently. It was so quiet that the only reason they noticed was because everyone had been so still, so quiet that they all heard El gasp.

"It's here," she said under her breath and maybe Nancy saw it, or maybe she imagined it, but El held on to Mike's arm the way she was glued to Steve and Jonathan, and suddenly Steve was snatched from their hands.

"Steve!" Jonathan called as Nancy looked around with wide eyes, trying to see in the dark.

It had been a bad idea. It had been such a bad idea to come at this unholy hour with no night vision and afraid of using flashlights, to step into magical territory to face a multidimensional rupture that could swallow them all. *Why the hell did they decide to come?*

All of that crossed Nancy's mind in a second as she looked for Steve and she was mildly aware of flashlights being turned on against the initial instructions, but she still couldn't find him, still couldn't see-

This time, Jonathan disappeared from her left side and without thinking twice, Nancy got hold of her gun, keeping both hands on it down as she turned around and around.

"Jonathan?" she called. Someone screamed, the sound fading as the person was thrown away, hitting the ground with a wet *woof* that made her gulp.

The moon came out from behind the clouds and for a moment it was bright enough for Nancy to see that Jonathan was unconscious against a tree trunk not ten feet from her, but the moment she stepped in his direction, someone blocked her way. The person was glowing and only partially Nancy realized that the light that made her see Jonathan did not come from the moon, but from them.

It was so bright that she had to step back and cover her eyes for a moment still firmly holding the gun. With narrowed eyes, Nancy could make out the shape of a woman with fair skin a glowing chest, red hair on her shoulders and a smirk that looked nothing like the girl she used to know. Barb.

"Hello, Nance," she said, and as her mouth opened, Nancy could feel the heat in her breath, as if there was fire in her tongue. "It's you and I now, sister," Barb said, and almost too late she realized that there was indeed fire coming from her, birthing in her chest and coming out of her mouth, just like a dragon.

Halfway across town, Will sat alone in Nancy's room.

The babies were sleeping, Teddy was at a work dinner and Lexi was keeping Karen and Joyce company downstairs. For some reason, Will had thought that Karen would turn to compulsory cooking to ease the nervous air in the house, but that didn't happen and he had to resign to unclipping and clipping the gun over and over, thinking it over.

Behind him was the case he had gotten from Nancy's closet. The rifle was loaded and he had put extra bullets in his pockets; as she had told him, there were other things there, the most interesting was a set of knives that looked extremely sharp, and with them there was a thin package with white powder that looked suspiciously like cocaine and had Moira Flint's signature in it, so he suspected it was some sort of monster killer poison.

Will's hand went to his stomach and he scratched it lightly. His middle was still carefully rolled in bandages, even though he'd been rid of the bindings on his head for a while now, and there still was some residual pain in the surgery scar. Jonathan said it was because his insides had been pocked and plucked and now he was hyper sensitive about it, which was probably true. His only job, Will knew, was to keep those stitches intact and not do anything too crazy.

And that was exactly the problem, though, Will kept thinking, the *clack* and *click* of the gun filling the room like it had filled the basement not so long ago. It was dark outside now, dark and thick and cold, and for things to be okay, some craziness was necessary.

Or else.

Letting his instincts take over, Will clipped the gun again, left the safety on and found himself a holster for his right leg, where the automatic was placed. He put on the flannel and jacket he'd been wearing before and then hung the rifle over his shoulder. He put the

extra clip in his back pocket and left the rest of the bullets in the case, closed it and put it back in Nancy's closet, though not on the top shelf this time, and then Will strutted back downstairs, going straight to the door.

"Will?" Lexi called, meeting by the entry of the living room, and he stopped. "Where are you going?"

He looked at her and took a deep breath, and then he looked at his mother, who was now standing in the middle of the living room, her arms crossed as she looked at him.

"How good were you at that throwing knife thing you said you did with your cousins when you were in New Mexico?" he asked Lexi, not giving explanations.

"Pretty damn good," she answered suspiciously. Will got closer to her, put his hands on her shoulders. "Why?"

"In Nancy's closet there's a case, and in that case there are a bunch of knives. Take them, keep them close just in case, and the gun. Give the gun to my mom. It's an old pistol, but it'll do. Also, leave the case out of reach from the girls. I gotta go."

"But you shouldn't go!" Lexi protested. "El said…"

"I know what El said, but they need me."

"You don't know that! Come on, how come I'm the only one protesting, Mrs. Murphy," she tried, turning to Joyce and his mom just looked at his pleading eyes sadly.

"Because he does know, Lexi," Joyce said carefully walking in their direction and reaching out for his cheek when she was close enough. "Right, baby?"

Will nodded.

"*What?*" Lexi exclaimed. "No! We just got you back!"

"*Maria, mi amor*," Will said with a smirk that didn't quite reach his eyes. Joyce dropped her hand and crossed her arms again. "*Yo tengo*

seis vidas más disponibles."

She raised her hand to slap him, but Will held her wrist, and when he looked at her, she was all teary eyed.

"How dare you talk in Spanish with me, your *bobo, cabrón*!" Lexi protested trying to hit him with her other hand, but he held her again and pulled her closer, kissed her forehead.

"I trust you to keep them safe, okay?" Will said softly, letting go of her wrists and Lexi covered her face sobbing. He looked at Joyce. "Mom."

"Don't you dare not come back to me," she said firmly and he gave her a wink.

"You don't really think you'd be rid of me so easily," he said and hugged her. "I'll be careful."

Joyce rubbed his shoulder tenderly then let him go and never stopped watching him, and as he thought about getting Mike's bike, or maybe Lucas' car from his garage, Will opened the front door and almost collided with none less than Spencer Hall.

"Penny?" he asked frowning at her raised fist that was ready to knock. She looked just as taken aback by him as he was by her.

"Uh… I was going home, but then I just… turned back," she said puzzled. "Is Mik-"

"That your car?" Will interrupted, pointing behind her and she shook her head.

"Yes."

"Then let's go," he said. She didn't move. "You want to talk to Mike, he's not home. I can show you where he is, but he won't be able to talk. Maybe you could help, though. Are you good at any sports? Something badass, preferably."

"Golf, I guess," Spencer said, sounding more and more confused. Will sighed disappointed.

"You have clubs in your car?"

"No."

He looked around quickly and spotted Teddy's golf bag.

"Can you tell which one of those is stronger?" he asked pointing at the bag; she followed his direction and then nodded. "Great. Here."

He got the bag and basically shoved it in her arms before passing by her.

"Give me your keys," he commanded. Spencer was following him, but clearly not knowing why. The women crowded the front door watching them go in shock.

"Can you even drive?" she asked stumbling with the big bag.

"Does it matter?" he replied already by the driver's door. "Do you know where to go?"

"Sort of," Spencer said with a shrug.

"Sort of won't get you there. I will. Keys."

Without further protest, she threw the keys to him over the car's roof and they both got inside. From the door of the Wheelers' Lexi, Joyce and Karen waved, and Will turned the engine on, speeding out of Maple Street.

He had just turned to the side road that'd lead them to the warehouse where things were most certainly going down, Will's feet down on the gas, when he suddenly had to stop short before running over a woman who was running down the road. She turned around with wide eyes mirroring Will's, Spencer's sudden scream still ringing inside the car, and after a while he recognized her.

"Terry?" he called, rolling down his window. She was all brown hair, wool clothes and thick gloves, and she anxiously stepped to his side.

"Will? We got to go there," she said. She looked crazy, but she didn't sound the least bit insane, her certainty echoed his.

"I know, it's where I'm going," he said and opened the door. "Hop in."

"You shouldn't-" she started and then shook her head. "Never mind."

"Will, she looks insane," Spencer hushed to him, even though he was sure Terry could hear her.

"Relax, she's cool," he simply said, short on explanations once again. There was no time for that.

She got in without a second word and all the while Penny stared at her with wide eyes. Will stepped on the gas again, mercilessly speeding to the Nemeton. Terry, who had been focused on the road for a while, turned to Spencer then.

"Oh," she said, as if it just occurred to her, and offered a hand. "Spencer Hall. I'm Terry Ives."

"How… do you know who I am?"

"Prissy, pretty, rich girl from Mike's work, right?" she said, and Will saw through the rearview mirror that she was smiling.

"Terry is El's mom," he told her and Penny frowned.

"I thought your mom was Elle's mom…" she said slowly.

"Joyce, yes," Terry said simply. "We share. She's the mother Ellie chose, and I'm…"

"Also that, but with a blood connection," Will completed and Terry smiled. Spencer shook her head.

"I keep forgetting you're not actually twins," she said apologetically and he shrugged.

"I know, right? The resemblance. No wonder Lucas keeps saying white people look all the same."

Spencer chuckled, but the joke wasn't enough to bring the same reaction from Terry, whose attention went back to the road. They were close, and it was starting to snow, but not enough to white the

ground just yet.

"Did you find a good club?" Will asked Spencer and she nodded taking the club from the bag that was between her legs.

"Why do I need it, anyway?" she asked.

"To fight the monster, obviously," he answered. "Can't go empty handed." He pointed the back seat, where he had put the rifle, but what she was looking at was his leg with the holster.

"Monster?" Penny echoed.

"Yeah, monster."

She turned a little on her seat to look at Terry, and then back at Will, as if waiting for a better explanation. Will sighed.

"What part confuses you?"

"Certainly there's no such a thing as a *monster*," Spencer said with little conviction. "Right? I mean, there are people who are horrible and should be stopped, like Hitler and Gorbachev, but not like… fantasy monsters, no."

Unconsciously, one of Will's hands went to his stomach again and he gulped.

"There most likely are, Penny," he said. She shook her head no, struggling to believe. "Did you ever get the chance to look at Mike's *Monsters Guide*?"

"From D&D?" she asked and he nodded. "Yeah."

Will raised his shirt revealing the bandages, enough to show the scars near his heart. It was cold in the car too, he forgot the window open.

"This was not made by a jaguar," he said daring to glance at her. "Nor this, and so wasn't this," he pointed at his bandages and then at his own head, meaning the scars in the back of his head, and Terry patted his shoulder tenderly.

"You're gonna avoid contact to keep this body strong, right, Billy?" she said squeezing his shoulder lightly, their eyes meeting in the mirror. Will smiled at her.

"You bet, Terry, you bet." Her hand lingered on his shoulder for a while longer and he kept his eyes on the road, feeling the steering wheel struggle to keep the car in a straight line, listening to the battle they were approaching. "You know, I'm thinking about getting a tattoo."

Terry smiled.

"I like that idea," she encouraged him.

In no time at all, they parked behind the hoard of cars and quickly got out. The ground was rumbling, something that Will had thought was the car, but now he could feel it under his feet; from the woods echoed shots and shouts. He patted his pockets, checking to see if everything was in place and hung the rifle over his shoulder again as Terry touched the ground worriedly and Spencer gave a few tentative swings on the club.

"You don't need to worry, Spencer," Terry told her, looking up from her crouched position. "I'm going to protect you."

"How?" Spencer asked, her voice an octave higher now that she was closer to the battle sounds. "You don't have any weapons."

"I have my mind," Terry humored her and Will chuckled. She got up, cleaned her hands on her jeans. "And I've got him."

Incredulous, Spencer only gapped at them until Will started to lead the way.

"Come on, it's time to step in."

What an odd trio they were as they entered the woods, Will on the front holding his automatic, stepping carefully on the freezing ground, both ladies side by side behind him. Terry was his compass, whispering lefts and rights that he should take, having him avoid the straight line he intended to take. At each step, it grew warmer and paradoxical, the snowflakes melted before touching their skin,

becoming some sort of out of season drizzle.

"It's warm," Spencer commented and Will nodded.

"Red Shadow is here," he said. "She doesn't like me much, something about me opening the tap, even though I clearly wasn't the first."

"Really?" Terry asked interested. "That's Barb's reason."

"Uh-hu. Funny, right?" It wasn't, not really.

"First to open the tap?" Spencer asked. "What does that mean?"

"It means she thinks I started it, but I didn't. Nor did El. El was a mean, I was part of the ladder, but the person who started it was the Lich."

"And he's not here, not yet," Terry said somberly and tapped his left elbow indicating where to go.

They had been crossing battle ground for a while now, but only after that subtle turn they actually *saw* it – the clearing of the Nemeton was shining yellow and blue from all the fire catching in dry trunks and the ice spiking half of the entrances. Spencer gasped when she saw a guy's arms stretch ahead in an inhuman way and snatch a soldier from between the trees to the middle of the clearing, breaking bones and smashing muscles in the process.

It was, to say the least, pretty gross.

"Monsters!" she said holding her club tight, unable to not watch as the creature-slash-man hit that soldier on the ground over and over with such brutality that didn't match the scared face of the man Will had seen at the elevator a few months ago.

"No," Will said unlocking the safety and pointing his gun at the man's head. Dexter was his name. He remembered because he flipped the DOE card over when it fell from the cocoon. "Just one monster with seven heads. And we have to kill them one by one like we killed the one in me."

Everything went quiet for a moment, at least in Will's ears. He

breathed in once, taking aim, feeling his posture straighten, his muscles set against the protests of his stitches. They were safe for now, because being a watcher Terry could pinpoint blind spaces, but as soon as he started shooting, it'd go crazy.

Will breathed out and his finger slipped in the trigger. Shot fired.

The bullet hit Dexter in the head, taking half of it away in a mini-explosion. Was that what all those technical terms in the manual meant then? You shoot and the thing you shot goes boom? Okay.

Will looked for a next target. He had to shoot as many of them as possible before they realized that he was there. Some shouts to the right side of the clearing caught his attention and he listened, felt, waited… and there came another soldier screaming in despair. Across from him, he saw Hopper beating the crap out of another head, Dale, a dark figure that used to be his friend and was now the closest to a supernatural ninja they could get. Will tried to point at him, but they were moving too much and it would be a risky shot, but then a shadow passed before his peripheral vision running after the soldier that still screamed in despair.

Will followed him with his eyes, knowing who he was too. He knew all of them, sort of, and feared them enough for his balls to shrink like dry plums, but if the quote that kept haunting him during his fever days meant anything, it meant that he'd stand here and he'd kill the SOBs as efficiently as he could. He couldn't go on, but he would. He had been. He planned on keep going.

He took the breath – in – and his finger slid in the trigger – out – but before he could shoot, something hit the walking nightmare that was Henry, former fishing enthusiast, in the back.

Surprised, Will lowered his hands and watched as Lucas stepped with his slingshot in the clearing throwing lethal ball after lethal ball at Henry, who still roared and launched at him with fury, but Lucas was the biggest of them, and his father had taught him hand in hand combat since he was little, mind tricks wouldn't faze him. You just had to know not to fuck with him. Out of nowhere, Lucas got a pair of knives right before Henry was on top of him, and Will couldn't see exactly what was going on, but after a minute or so of struggling,

Henry was dead spilling blood through a deep cut in his jugular.

There was barely time for Will to breathe relieved, for Dustin came out of the woods screaming, running towards Hopper with a gun in his left hand. They gave him a shock gun after all, Will wondered, or maybe he had gotten it from an unconscious Jonathan, but that was a possibility that he didn't want to think about.

Dustin shot, the electrical wire sending sparks as it stretched and hit Dale's hand, making him convulse with the discharge and drop to his knees, and in the middle of his celebration something hit Dustin's shoulder hard, a shard of blue that threw him only a few feet from Will, Terry and Spencer.

"Dustin!" a rather collective call echoed.

Being closer, Will rushed to his friend's side and saw that it was a shard of ice that had hit him, passing though his shoulder blade, carving in his shoulder, frost biting his skin and practically impaling him to the ground.

"Dustin!" Will called, his hands checking his pulse and then slapping him lightly on the face. "Come on, man, stay with me."

Dustin's eyes fluttered open and focused on Will.

"What the hell you doing here, man," he asked weakly and Will smiled.

"Shut up and don't move, I'm gonna get it out," he said and took a deep breath. He was partially aware that Lucas had come to Dustin's other side and Spencer was kneeling in front of them, her eyes on some point behind them and her mouth hanging in absolute shock, eyes wide with terror. "Hold him down."

He didn't wait to see if Lucas had followed his instructions, he just got to it, using hands movements to coordinate what his mind wanted to do. With a firm yank, the thick ice was out and thrown away, and then there was blood, so much blood, and Lucas took off his jacket and pressed it on Dustin's shoulder.

"Hang in there, buddy," Lucas said pressing on the wound. There was

a cut on his cheek and his shirt was ragged, but he looked overall okay. Dustin, on the other hand, had a two side wounds, and they had to get him to the ER as soon as possible.

"Take this," Will said shoving Spencer's car keys in Lucas' pocket and helping Dustin sit up. "Penny," he called trying to snap her out of her shock. "Spencer!"

"What the fuck was that," she mumbled under her breath and then Will shook her, forcing her to pay attention to him.

"Penny, Dustin is hurt, you need to take him out of here and to the hospital. Now!"

His firm command made her blink and focus, and then she started to help them get Dustin on his feet. He was too weak to walk, so Lucas put him on his back and with Spencer helping put pressure on the wound the shot through where Will had come without looking back, Teddy Wheeler's club forgotten on the ground. Will hoped Penny wouldn't need it on her way back to the car.

Concentrating, Will felt everything around him. He didn't know where Terry was, but he could feel her energy the way he could feel El's energy boiling hot, and he could feel the earthy power that rolled like magma under their feet and fed the remaining heads.

Three were gone already, four to go.

Putting the locked automatic back in the holster and taking the rifle from his shoulder, Will fished two extra bullets from his pocket and turned around. El was on it with Dale, who had knocked Hopper off his feet, so the least Will could do was find Barb, and for that all he had to do was follow the fire.

I will go on, he told himself, and his feet led the way between the barren trunks, rifle pointed as he let instinct take over, muffle everything around him.

"Will!" Steve called in a hush and he looked to his right, saw that he was supporting Jonathan, who balanced on his left foot. They looked whole. Dirty and tired and beaten, but whole, so that was a relief.

"She's not letting us get closer."

"Nancy can handle it, though," Jonathan said in the same hushed voice. "You shouldn't be here."

"*Stop whining about me being here*," Will complained annoyed and looked at where the heat was concentrated the most, frowned. "And no, she can't."

Without stopping again, he kept going silently, as if foreseeing where the ground would shake before he'd step, and then he saw them.

"Come on, Nance, why don't you be a good girl for once?" Barb snarled rounding the large tree that Nancy was using to take cover.

There was no hiding from Barb, Nancy knew it. Not with her breath so shallow, or with the burned smell she exhaled. She had carefully chosen a fireproof jacket for that night knowing that she'd face the angriest version of Barb she could ever imagine, but it turned out it was no match against a dragon.

Nancy looked down at her left arm, the red skin that burned from the back of her hand to her elbow. She'd had to remove the burning jacket and now she stood in a freezing cold, yet uncomfortably warm position; besides, from the looks of it, she wouldn't be writing for a while.

She tried to flex her fingers and it sent a sharp pain up her arm that made her flinch and she stumbled to the right, sensing Barb come to her left. Barb knew she had hit Nancy's good side and would not let that advantage go. Taking a deep breath, Nancy tested the weight of the gun in her right hand and realized that there was probably a new smell coming from her, and it tasted as bitter as the dread on her tongue.

"*Nancy…*" Barb sang and Nancy tried to peek to her left, her palm sweating on the gun, but she couldn't see how close Barb was, her eyes stung by the smoke. "*Come on out, it's a great* party *outside.*"

Out of all the things Barb could become, *why a dragon*? Why the title creature from Nancy's brother's beloved fantasies? Why the very

thing that she had introduced to Mike in a bonding attempt was coming to bite her ass using the form of her best friend?

It made Nancy so sad, but also so angry! Because it wasn't Barb, but it was, and she missed her, but she couldn't have her. Barb was dead and it'd been a long time now, but… but…

Nancy shook her head. No matter how many 'buts' she put in her lines of thoughts, it'd always come back to this – that Mr. and Mrs. Holland had searched and looked for Barb for over a year, but the Department of Energy did not bring her body from the Upside Down and there was never a letter or a call, and eventually the family packed their things, sold the house and went away. Las Vegas, from what Nancy heard. It'd been a while since she last picked up the phone and tried to call the Hollands again. She never knew what to say besides 'I'm sorry.'

"Barb," Nancy said heartbroken, holding the gun to her chest. She didn't know how many bullets she still had, but she guessed not many. She'd have to do this, though, because it wasn't Barb, *it wasn't*. Red Shadow, they called it, vicious and ruthless. Not Barb. Not Barb. Still, she had to say it.

"Nancy," Barb replied sounding much closer. Nancy took a deep breath and realized she was crying, so she blinked the tears away. She needed her vision for this.

"I'm sorry," she said and stepped out of her cover, pointing the gun at Barb.

"Why?" Barb said casually. She posed as if it was all good, but her shiny chest told another story. She was charging to fire. "This is the best thing that could've happened to me. I mean, no one can say I'm not hot anymore, right?"

Barb's smile turned into a snarl and Nancy gulped. Without a second thought she aimed and shot, the click of the gun made the dragon's eyebrows go up in surprise, but not because it was hit, but because the gun was jammed. Or… empty.

"Well, well, well," Barb said with an evil smirk that was more

terrifying than anything else she'd done so far, walking in Nancy's direction, and Nancy stumbled back. "Now, Nance, don't you know the saying? Lucky in love, unlucky in the game."

She took a deep breath and Nancy knew for a fact that it was over. She could see the fire building in the back of Barb's mouth, because it was like the fire made Barb bigger than herself and it was over, it was over, she had promised Holly that everything would be fine, but after this Nancy would be another body to count and-

A dry sound echoed in the woods and the wind cut near Nancy's ear, a bullet passed by her and straight to Barb's open mouth, hitting her throat and making her gag. Nancy dropped to the ground ignoring her stinging arm, covered her head just in time to hear another shot. She kept her eyes closed, but through the ground she could feel as Barb's corpse dropped, finally dead and gone.

Nancy didn't want to look, so she turned her head to the other side and opened her eyes just in time to see Will lowering his riffle.

"Fucking heads," he said annoyed and Nancy struggled to her feet and stumbled in his direction, hugging him.

"Thank you," she said under her breath and he patted her back friendly.

"You're welcome," he said. "Count your bullets next time, and you'll be fine."

Nancy chuckled, and her chuckle turned into a sob. It was over, wasn't it? Finally over, but in a way better than the one she thought it'd be over not two minutes ago, and if that wasn't a win-

"Blood," she heard someone say.

Under them, the ground trembled considerably, making her knees protest. Blinking confused, Nancy looked around and saw Mike pulling El from the clearing, all the remaining soldiers scrambling and stumbling to the tree line, a woman that looked a lot like Terry Ives helping Hopper to his feet. In the clearing, there was a river of blood and from the sky dropped Dale's body as Mike diverted El's

concentration.

"Blood, like when the Demogorgon would come!" he shouted. He'd been the one shouting. "It's the gate!"

The ground cracked open causing an earthquake that got them all on their asses, and wide-eyed Nancy watched the crack go all the way to the warehouse beyond the tree line, the building peeling down and breaking, huge chunks of concrete dangerously hitting the ground. There weren't that many people left, now that she paid attention, and the bodies in the clearing started to get swallowed by the crack. More inconclusive disappearances for families, she suspected.

"Are they coming from fucking hell?" Steve asked out loud, his voice almost muffled by the noises that the crack was making as it widened. It was dark and slimy in the clearing, and only the fire that still was catching in some of the trees illuminated the place.

"He's here," Will said struggling to get on his feet, staring at the crack that was dividing the old warehouse in two.

At first, Nancy couldn't see anyone, but as her eyes adapted to the dark she could swear that there was someone coming from the crack, strutting out as if they weren't coming from a parallel universe, forcing their way through a sticky membrane like she had to do not that many years ago. And then, Nancy realized that it wasn't just one person, but two.

Several guns where unlocked and pointed at the same time, including Nancy's, who momentously forgot about her burned arm and hand. Not that it didn't sting, but she didn't care. She just wanted to be ready for whatever.

The man that came first was tall and lean, his hair completely white. He walked with this authority that didn't quite match the battle that'd been going on in there, stepping on bloody soil as if it was nothing. Nancy didn't know him, but Will whispered 'Brennan', so she guessed she was finally meeting the feared Papa.

The other man was a little shorter, with greying long hair tied back. He looked much more relaxed, but there was a powerfulness about

him that said it all. It was settled nicely on his shoulders as he passed by Brennan walking in El's direction.

Everyone got extra tense, torn between wanting to protect El and knowing that that man was responsible for all the shit that'd been happening in Hawkins for over three years now, aware that they were no match for him. Perhaps, Nancy wondered, El was the only match for him.

To her credit, she didn't even flinch as he approached, but stepped out of Mike's arms instead, getting up and standing tall on the board of trees.

"Look at her," he said. His voice was hoarse, probably for lack of use, and it added an extra eeriness to him. "My beautiful daughter."

"I'm not," El said firmly and Heron smirked. "Not by a long shot."

"Now, from what I gathered with my friend Brennan here, you weren't such a talker."

"Nicholas," someone else called and Nancy's eyes, like Heron's, went to Terry, who was stepping into the clearing, though her gun was still pointing at him. His eyebrows went up, but he didn't seem surprised.

"Terry," he said. "I was expecting you tonight."

"Were you?" she asked. "I thought you got all your information from Brennan, and last time he *saw me*…"

"Oh, yeah, I'm aware," Nicholas said turning in her direction. "I wasn't very happy about it either, but look what that got us, right love?"

He pointed vaguely in El's direction and Nancy saw herself holding her gun a little steadier.

"More than half of your heads are dead, Nicholas," Terry said. She sounded awfully calm as she closed the space between them. "How about you stop this madness once and for all and we go home, huh? Talk it over, get to know our girl. Don't you want to know her? Her name is Elle and she's fifteen. She plays hockey and likes to sing. She's really strong-"

"See, there lays the problem, love," Nicholas said resting a finger on Terry's lips. They were that close now, and Nancy didn't even realize how that happened. "You and I together made a ticking bomb, and she's *too damn strong*."

Slowly – even though it probably wasn't happening that slowly, but Nancy wasn't really able to tell time with the sudden cold blood she got in her veins – Nicholas turned his eyes to El. There was nothing soft or paternal in the way he looked at her, just a… jealousy? Was that it?

Nancy was so focused on keeping her aim despite her stinging arm that she didn't quite picture what happened after that. One moment Terry was there, by Nicholas' side, and the other she wasn't anymore, but there was a knife, or dagger partially impaled in his collarbone, stopping him from doing whatever it was he was going to do when he raised his hand to take it out. There was a shot somewhere, and then hell broke loose.

The ground raised and Nancy was thrown on her back; the only thing she could see before there was a wall of dirt in front of her was Hopper running in Brennan's direction and El's feet off the ground.

"NO!" she heard Mike scream and she looked over at him, saw him stumble to the wall and pound at it with his fists, and then with the bat Steve had given him. "EL! LET HER GO, YOU FUCKING BASTARD! EL!"

"Where's Will?" Jonathan asked and Nancy looked over at him. He tried to get up, but his broken ankle wouldn't let him. The despair in his face broke Nancy's heart. "Not again, come on, not again."

"EL!" Mike kept calling, kept hitting the wall.

It was much darker now, and so, so cold. The snow was falling heavily and the fire Barb had set didn't last long in these frozen trunks. Nancy let go of her gun and looked for something to try and bring that wall down too, finding the riffle Will had been using before.

The moment she got a hand of it, one knee on the trembling ground

to help her steady, time stopped. Before Nancy's very eyes, dirty and twigs floated; she was partially aware of gasps and shocked exclamations around her, and completely aware of how Mike stopped calling for El.

That… was bigger than anything else. Bigger than anything Nancy had seen or heard the past years fighting alongside those kids. It was impossibly huge and in a moment of comprehension she understood that El alone couldn't do such a thing. She understood, like Mike understood, that-

"They're together," Mike said under his breath and his eyes widened. "CAREFUL!" he exclaimed on the top of his lungs and hurried behind a tree.

There was no time for Nancy to find a tree to use as protection, but even less for Jonathan with his injury, so she did the only reasonable thing she could think of – joined Steve and helped cover Jon. She did hit her arm in the process, but it didn't matter the slightest when the deafening scream echoed in the woods, breaking the dirt wall in millions of pieces, dirty and barks showering over them like the snow still insisted on falling.

It rang in their ears like an explosion and for a long moment Nancy didn't even want to open her eyes, afraid of finding Nicholas Heron and Brennan standing there instead of El, Will and Hopper, but they were Jonathan's family and he was anxious.

Steve moved first, and then Nancy, each sitting on each side of Jonathan. Her ears were still ringing, and Nancy looked around the now ruined Axis borderline numb. It was gone, the whole Nemeton. Destroyed in blood, ice and magma, in its own supernatural strength.

A shadow stood near her and she flinched before she realized it was just a person – Mike, little bro – and he helped her on her feet. She thought of going forward into the clearing, but his hand on her arm stopped her, bringing her attention to his face.

"Mike," Nancy said, her voice sounded distant, as distant as his expression. He was dirty and raggedy like everyone else, there was blood caked on the side of his face and his lip was cut.

She followed his eyes and swallowed; the sounds settled in her ears. A few feet from them stood Hopper with a bloody golf club; a bit further was Will holding his middle with concern, his face was pale and lips painted in blood. And close to the cracked ground, El was kneeling by Terry's unconscious body, a headless Nicholas Heron hung from the crack, this close to falling over.

"Mom," El called shaking Terry. There was something wrong with her, but Nancy couldn't quite place what exactly.

"What kind of Stephen King shit was that?" Steve asked looking around and Nancy frowned at him. Damn boy with a half-tamed mouth. When he spoke again, however, it was with heartbreak. "*Oh, shit.*"

"Mommy," El called again. Nancy more felt than saw her brother swallow before he let go of her hand and stepped in the ruined clearing himself. "Mommy, come on."

"Ellie," Hopper said dropping the club, but he stopped when she sobbed.

Mike didn't stop, though. He reached El and touched her shoulder before kneeling by her side. Ever so gently he embraced her, hands firmly on her shoulders. She was saying something, but from where she was Nancy couldn't understand what it was. Mike plucked El from Terry and then Nancy understood what was off about the woman; her neck…

She turned around and saw that Jonathan was hugging Steve. As if sensing her there, he reached out his hand and she took it, being pulled into their embrace. She kissed Jonathan and then Steve, and they kissed too, and the three of them stood there in that embrace until one of the remaining military people that were part of that mission placed jackets and blankets on their shoulders.

13. Epilogue

Author's note: And so it ends.

I'd like to take this space to thank everyone who'd been with me, specially those who came a little over an year ago willing to read a nice, light fic with '*1985*' and stayed for this year long crusade that this series became. I'm so glad you took the time to read my fics and leave reviews, that means so, so much to me! You guys are incredible, and I hold you all dear.

I'd like to leave 2 special thanks before we get to the epilogue. **Jenna** (littlecajunlady88), my beta reader, thank you for actually watching ST when I told you you'd like it. I don't know if I would be able to write this without your support and insight, you're awesome! And **Mari** (loveisourresistance)! You guys, I've been friends with Mari for almost a decade, and we'd been apart for a while before *1985* brought us together again. What a weird way for things to happen, huh? And she's been a lovely, faithful supporter, with casual 'you know what I've been missing? your fic' messages on whatsapp and instagram heh. I love you both, ladies, you rock!

Season 2 is really, really close now, and soon this fic will be obsolete. But I'm glad to have y'all's support through the writing process that this trilogy took, and I certainly hope to write more ST fics sometime in the future, after I binge s02 a couple of times (let's face it, it's totally gonna happen).

Thank you, guys! A thousand thank yous! You are all the real MVPs.

Please, leave a review. And I hope I'll see you soon!

SPRING

"*When shadows and demons are chasing, there's no way that our hearts will be breaking*
'cause all we have is love."

Sabrina Carpenter – *All We Have is Love*

EPILOGUE

May, 1987

Nancy was still taking down the photos from her side of the room when her roommate, the goody two-shoes nurse student that silently side-eyed Nancy's borderline erotic pictures and worrisome nightmares for the past couple of years, finished packing her things. She put her suitcase down loudly and hugged her fluffy pillow with both hands as she looked at Nancy.

"I guess I'll see you next fall, then?" she said and Nancy turned around to look at her.

She was holding the framed poster that Will had made for the story Mike wrote for her, a patched and pierced one piece almost her size. Looking closely you could see where the sheets of paper had been put together with tape and glue, a detailed and careful work bursting with color.

Whatever had happened in Will's brain last winter made him resurge better than he'd ever been. Kid had real talent.

"I don't think so," Nancy said looking at her roommate. The girl frowned at her. "I'm… transferring to Boston."

"You are?" she exclaimed surprised.

"Yeah," Nancy nodded. "Pre-med."

"*What*?" the girl asked slowly. "But the archeology program…"

Nancy smiled.

"You know, my brother said the same thing when I told him," she said putting the frame on her bed. Her father would come pick her up any moment, and she still had quite a lot of packing to do, but it wouldn't hurt to spend a few minutes explaining herself. "But I found what I was looking for and got what I needed. My work here is done."

Her roommate said nothing, just staring at Nancy with raised eyebrows. Maybe she should start thinking of the girl as "ex-

roommate" now, since she was definitely transferring to the school she'd dreamed of since she was a kid.

"You're… weird," the roommate said and Nancy chuckled.

"Thanks!"

"I think I might kind of miss you," she said and looked over Nancy's shoulder to the photo that was still on the wall. "Even though you do some things I don't agree with."

Nancy looked at the photo too, still in love, still missing that spring with her men. It was different now, hard to be apart after everything they'd been through, but they still loved each other, separation, trauma and all.

"Isn't that how friendships work, though?"

"Friendship?" her roommate echoed surprised.

To be honest, Nancy didn't know why she sounded so surprised; that girl had been putting up with her especially for the past semester, after she came back from-

A shudder went through Nancy's spine. Sometimes, she still could smell the blood. Behind her eyelids she still could see Nicholas Heron's headless body, and the pieces of Brennan's brain sticking on the golf club that she later found out was her father's. Hopper had kicked the body back into the abyss that now adorned Hawkins' Axis, but-

It still was in the back of her mouth, the acrid taste of dread, printed down her throat the smell of burning flesh. Her fireproof jacked had helped a lot, protecting her as best as it could from Barb's flames, and by now the rosy skin of her forearm was brand new, as if it hadn't been severed at all, the back of her hand being the only part that scared and even so just faintly.

Her situation was so much less physically traumatizing than Dustin's, whose injury had him have his whole shoulder blade replaced by a titanium plaque. From all she knew, he was still in recovery, lucky to be hurt on his bad arm and still being able to write just fine.

Nancy could barely hold a pen for weeks, and when her body began to respond, her brain started to freeze. She'd wake up gasping for breath, screaming, crying. She'd wake up beaten, broken, burned. She'd wake up to a wet bed, unable to move, sick to her stomach. She'd bolt out of bed and throw up on the floor, and she'd be burning hot, and everything was dust and ashes and a rough blanket on her shoulders.

Three years in this life of monsters, for the first time she knew it was over. For the first time she remained shit scared.

And through it all, her roommate stayed with her, that rare breed Catholic from Utah who wanted to work for the Red Cross somewhere in Africa or Middle East. She shook Nancy out of nightmares, nursed her back to health, helped her clean up any messes she made, found Nancy's classmates and asked for their notes when Nancy couldn't leave the bed. She bought a bedside lamp and kept it on every night, and she read the story Mike had written out loud when she noticed that Nancy was getting paranoid again, marveling at the great panel created by Will when a scene portrayed there was being narrated and not a single time she asked questions.

"Yes," Nancy said and she quickly looked around. By the lamp was a pile of used notebooks and she picked the one on top, found herself a black marker and wrote down on the back of the cover her phone and address. "Here, give me a call before the summer is over, I'll let you know how to find me once I know where I'll be in Boston. Let's keep in touch, right?"

The roommate smiled as she accepted the notebook and nodded. Her name was Molly, and Nancy remembered being fond of her without even knowing her when she moved to Maine because it was like "Holly", but with Mike's "M".

"Sure," Molly said. "Maybe we'll work together someday, if you're going to be a M.D."

Nancy shrugged playfully.

"I don't know, you'll be saving lives in Asia or something and I like it here in the States."

"Who knows?" the roommate replied. "We still have a long way until we reach our future, right?"

A large, knowing smile spread on Molly's face and Nancy mirrored it. That was a line from Mike's story, something that they both shared now, and it felt nice. It felt so nice.

There was a rapid knock on the door and they both looked out to see a grey-haired couple looking at them. Molly's parents.

"Hi, Nance," the mother greeted warmly and Nancy waved. "Are you set, kiddo?"

"Yes, Mom," Molly said and her father helped taking her things out.

They said their goodbyes, parting on a better note than it had happened the previous spring. And Nancy still had a lot of packing to do.

About a thousand miles from there, under a hot, unforgiving sun, Hawkins High's sophomore class was having a baseball rematch against the seniors. In all honesty, it wasn't exactly a "rematch", seeing that it involved no reward of store discounts or tickets to games, but the rivalry between those classes was off the charts, and any game they had against each other gathered a crowd in the bleachers.

Biting his lower lip nervously, Mike constantly checked his watch and looked in the direction of the gymnasium, where the locker rooms were and where Will had disappeared to.

"Stop that," El warned him, putting a hand on his anxious leg and he sighed frustrated.

"I can't believe he's doing that to me again," Mike complained and Dustin shook his head.

"Guess you should learn how to say no to him, then," he said and Mike stared at him.

"Can *you* say no to Will?" he asked.

"Yes," Dustin guaranteed at the same time everyone said, "No!"

"I don't know why you have to be such a whiny bitch about it, Mike," Lucas said on Mike's other side. "You just need three strikes to be out. It's easier to miss than to hit."

"That's true," Jennifer pointed out.

"That's not the point," Mike complained. "The point is he said 'Hey, can you hold my place in the line for me?', and he absolutely has to be back by the time it's his turn so I don't have to play."

"STRIKE OUT!" Ms. Franco, who was doubling as a referee, shouted and Mike shuddered.

"Gee, Mike, stop being a baby about it, it's just baseball," El said waving him off and he looked at her as if she'd just betrayed him. "Look, you want to be out of the field as fast as possible, you keep your eyes on the ball and swing that bat."

"Mike, you're up!" Savannah informed. Whenever they had anything sporty going on, she'd take charge because she was the boss. Against his will, Mike got up and got himself a helmet and a bat. "Do you know where the fuck Will is?"

He shook his head no.

"Don't even talk to me about him," he whined dragging his feet to the base.

"MIKE!" El called, standing next to Savannah. He looked at her. "Eye on the ball!"

Annoyed out of his mind, Mike just sighed and took a stand. He waited, eye on the ball; the pitcher was Pat Curry, El's sort-of-ex, and he didn't like Mike very much, though they never ever talked. When he pitched, the ball came with a lot of effect, so Mike had to time his swing with precision. He didn't breathe, just let his arms do the movement, and for a split second he was in the dark hitting a dirt wall to get to his girlfriend, but it lasted just that – a second – and he was back in the field hitting the ball in whatever way he could and praying it'd go somewhere.

Mike's eyes widened when he realized that the ball was actually going a long way, having seniors running around like drunk insects to try and catch it, and with utter confusion he realized that the ball went beyond the fence when he was pretty sure he hit it all wrong.

"HOME RUN!" someone screamed and Mike looked back, saw El hiding her laugh behind her hand. That explained a lot.

"Do I really have to go all around the field?" he asked Ms. Franco and she nodded. Dropping the bat on the ground and getting the awkward run base after base went Mike Wheeler.

"I can't believe he actually managed to hit that, Pat is a mean pitcher," Savannah said impressed and El did her best to look composed. "He must be a natural."

El chuckled and shook her head.

"Nah, it's just luck," she guaranteed with a serious nod, the two of them watching him go around the field to complete the score. "Savannah, do you know what a nymphomaniac is?" she asked randomly. Savannah turned to her frowning.

"Someone addicted to sex," she said, her tone of voice suggesting that she wasn't sure it was a question that she actually wanted her answer. El nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"'Cause I think my brother is that," she said with a casual shrug. "I'm worried about him."

"Will?"

"Yeah."

"Is that what he's doing now? How do you know?"

"Twinsie stuff," El said waving her hand as if it was nothing. "And I know things. Anyway, I think he's addicted to sex and it concerns me. No addiction is good, you know?"

Savannah was frowning at El, her face a mix of concern and confusion, and she carefully stepped away. Mike joined El just as

Savannah started putting some distance and he looked confused from one girl to the other.

"You guys," Savannah said slowly. "Are really weird."

"What's going on?" Mike asked and El shrugged.

"I talked a little too much, I guess. People get unsettled by that."

"They definitely do," Mike said with a nod and put an arm around her shoulders. "Thanks for the home run, babe."

"What are you talking about, that was *all you*," she said looking up at him and smirking. He shook his head.

"Shut up and take my gratitude, you freak."

"I don't accept gratitude from you in words," El said.

"You don't?" She shook her head no.

"Just in kisses."

"Just in kisses, huh?" he echoed and she nodded, so he used is free hand to hold her face and kissed her mouth.

"EW!" someone, probably Lucas, exclaimed at the same time someone else threw an empty cup at them, and another person said, "Gross! Get a room!"

But in the background, what some heard was Preston Telles wondering where Jessy Stoker had gone to, because she'd be the third batter in the next inning.

As a matter of fact, Jessy Stoker was a little busy… and a little breathless. The cold wall of the boys' locker room against her back did nothing to ease the heat all over her body, the line of kisses Will Byers left on her jaw and neck burned her skin and she eagerly dug her short nails on his shoulders, her ankles crossed behind his back. If he wasn't holding her hips so firmly, she would most certainly not have the strength to stay up.

Holy shit, she thought gasping for air, and maybe she even said it out loud, because Will let out a chuckle before he kissed her again. There was something about his kisses that was sloppy, messy and absolutely mesmerizing. She was, to say the least, on cloud nine.

Her feet hit the floor, first one and then the other, and Will's hands went up from her ass to the small of her back, their chests pressed together as they caught their breaths. She had taken off his shirt, revealing a few scars on his chest and stomach, and a tattoo above his heart with four short words.

I will go on.

From all she knew, there had been a cancer in his stomach, and maybe even in his head, because his once long hair was now just long enough for her to tangle her fingers in it. He'd been out of school for over a month, and during the Social Studies Fair held in December, the school even paid him some sort of homage, as if he already was dead. Ava Taylor had to present their project alone in tears and Jessy suspected she only got second place because of all the sentimentality.

"Now, that was fun," Will said kissing the corner of her mouth. He discarded the condom and they put their clothes back in place. Jessy smiled at him, her back still against the wall.

"You know, Ava Taylor was right," she said fixing her top. He raised an eyebrow at her. "I thought she was exaggerating, but no."

"You guys talk about me?" he asked with some surprise and she smirked. "What did she say?"

"She said you know how to fuck."

Will laughed, zipping up his jeans. Damn, he was cute.

"Thanks," he said honestly and she laughed too.

"Well, I'm heading back. I'm sure Mike aged a few years just by having to play for like, one inning."

Jessy gasped then. The game! She was supposed to batting!

"You coming?" he asked and she nodded.

"Go ahead, I'll be right there."

Without asking twice, Will headed back to the field. The crowd was surprisingly cheery for just an inter-class game, but he guessed that his class did have some A class players, mostly among the girls. If Savannah and Lexi didn't make it to a national team in their sports, Will would lose his faith in the American dream.

Lucas was pitching and one of the big guys from the football team was the batter. He might have been one of the guys trying to get Brad Miller to beat him up, which was a useless attempt. The kind of hitting Brad Miller wanted with Will was different. Lucas threw the ball and there was collective gasp from the crowd as Hulk tried to hit, because the bat escaped from his hand, flying in Will's direction.

Casually, Will reached up and caught the bat with his right hand, even giving it a flip before looking at Hulk unimpressed.

"You call yourself an *athlete*?" he said provocatively. Hulk strutted in his direction, but before he'd get too close, Will pushed the bat against his chest, keeping a safe distance.

"You think you're so funny, Byers, Imma-"

"*What?*" Will teased looking at him in the eye, still pushing the bat against the other guy. "What're you gonna do? Beat me? Because you can't even hold a baseball bat? Think fast." He tossed the bat at Hulk, who failed to catch it, letting it fall dangerously close to his foot. "Pathetic."

Hulk lunged at him, but Ms. Franco already was by their side, breaking the fight before it even started. Will didn't even flinch.

"I'm gonna break your pretty face, Byers!" Hulk threated.

"You can try," Will replied. Hulk was about his height, but twice as large. It didn't mean Will feared him, though. When you faced death three times and fought a couple of monsters since you were twelve, it was hard to fear *people*. Angry high school boys had nothing on him.

"Hulk, can it," Ms. Franco said firmly, pushing the boy away and then she glared at Will. "And you're not helping."

"What! I'm a saint!" he joked, and she shook her head. Hulk got his bat from the ground and strutted back to the base, because he still had a couple of tries before being out.

"Explain to me again why we can't count on you for the baseball team?" she asked, as if it really broke her heart.

"Because I fucking hate it," he told her.

The only reason why he even knew how to play baseball was because of Lonnie, and that wasn't even a good enough reason anymore, hadn't been for a long time. Ms. Franco sighed saddened and shook her head.

"Go take a seat, William," she said already going back to the field.

Will turned around to join his friends, and he was grossed out to see his sister all snuggled with Mike.

"Gross," he said making a face at her and sat between her and Jennifer. El gave him the tongue.

"*You're* gross," she replied elbowing him. "Where were you?"

"Around," Will said vaguely, his eyes on the field. Lexi was a catcher for this inning.

"I can't believe you didn't even flinch when Hulk came at you," Jen said impressed and Will shrugged.

"What you have to understand, Jen, is that no one has balls like me," he said, his line of thought interrupted by "*ugh*"s and "*oh, my God*"s. He caught Savannah staring at him, and when their eyes crossed, she smiled, quickly turning away. "Also, you don't grow up with Lonnie as a father without learning to punch back and shoot things. Why is Savannah being weird?"

El said nothing and he looked at her.

"Hopper," he said and she smiled.

"I might have mentioned your nymphomania to her."

"*What?*"

"She was a bit unsettled at first, but I guess she's coming around."

"El, I'm not-"

"You should stop with the denial, dude," Dustin said. "Everyone knows."

"Seriously, you're something out of a French movie," Mike affirmed. Will shook his head.

"That's not a bother, that's cool," he said.

"OUT!" Ms. Franco called and Hulk went back to the bench angrily snorting, Jessy Stoker passed by him to position at the base. Will smirked.

"Jessy Stoker?" El exclaimed. Will put his hand on her face, trying to shut her up with little to no success. "Seriously?"

"What's the problem?" he asked. She had put her hand on his face too, pushing him away.

Dustin, Jennifer and Mike shook their heads tiredly. Before, Will and El only had this supernatural, eerie bond. Of course they grew to feel like family, them being so similar in so many ways, but they never had the chance to act like actual siblings. Ever since January, that had changed, and it was for the better.

"She's hot!" Will argued.

"She's a bitch! Get off!"

"You get off!"

"Jesus," Jennifer sighed, their bickering muffled by their friends' giggles. "I'm glad I'm an only child."

"I'm glad all my brothers are so much older than me that I'm practically an only child," Dustin agreed. He was holding Jennifer's hand, their fingers laced together.

Jessy Stoker hit the ball so bad it ended up going backwards and hitting El, making the twins stop their argument.

"HEY!" El exclaimed getting up and Mike held her arm, made her sit down again.

"Calm down, Edge Lord," he said. "It wasn't on purpose."

El pouted and crossed her arms. Will didn't like how revealing her top was, so he started taking off his shirt.

"Jesus, Ellie, decency," he said.

She frowned at him.

"Don't come at me with decency talk when you're finding excuses to strip!" El exclaimed. "Put your shirt back on!"

Mike lowered his head, covering his face with his hands as he tried to hide his laugh, but it didn't help that they were interrupted by the neighbor bench.

"Why are you trying to cover him, Hopper?" Polly asked, and when they looked over, there was a group of girls looking at their bench. "He's got too much layers going on. Take it off, Will!"

"Yeah, take it off!" someone shouted from the bleachers, starting a new chant.

"TAKE! IT! OFF! TAKE! IT! OFF!" some people shouted. Mike's stomach was beginning to hurt from so much laughter. El made a face.

"Gross," she said disgusted. Will looked at her with a smirk, his shirt half opened.

"What can I do?" he said innocently. "I'm fucking hot."

El rolled her eyes and leaned back shaking her head. Will buttoned up his shirt again, getting a disappointed "*ah*" in return, and sat back down between El and Jennifer. They still had powers and were just beginning to recover from the trauma, but life was simple again. Finally.

Will elbowed El and she elbowed him back, and then she laid her head on his shoulder, her hand on Mike's. After Jessy was out, it'd be their turn at the base, but until then, Lucas was having fun as the pitcher, Lexi as his faithful right hand when the ball went in her direction.

At last, there wasn't a dangerous threat hovering above their heads, just a baseball game to end the school year.

Things were good.